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THEY WRITE...

JOSEPH SHALLIT

"Wonder Child was written while I was undergoing the agonies of anticipated paternity. The imagined horrors of diaper-changing led naturally to the speculation that created the story. My career prior to fatherhood consists of six years on the now extinct Philadelphia Record, over three years in Uncle Sam's Military Police. The latter experience, plus my work as a police reporter, led to writing mystery novels, the fourth of which was recently published. For several years I was science editor of the Record, which explains my trips into science fiction."

DEL MOLARSKY

"I barnstormed all over the country—at 17—giving marionette shows. I was a one-man team: making the puppets, composing the music, writing the scripts. I've been composing and writing ever since. Creating advertising copy takes up my days, but for relaxation I write—and sell—scripts to radio, TV, the films, and magazines. And I occasionally compose songs for such concert artists as Marian Anderson and Yi-Kwei Sze."

ROBERT BLOCH

"The day after I was born World War I began—but I managed to dodge the draft. I spent a sadistic but scientific childhood: instead of tearing the wings off flies I tore the wings off model airplanes. I sold my first story when I was 17—since then have sold close to 300 stories of fantasy, science fiction and mystery, plus a novel and a book of short stories. Also adapted 39 of my stories for a radio transcription series. In my spare time I've acquired a wife, a child, and a slightly haggard look."

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fantastic

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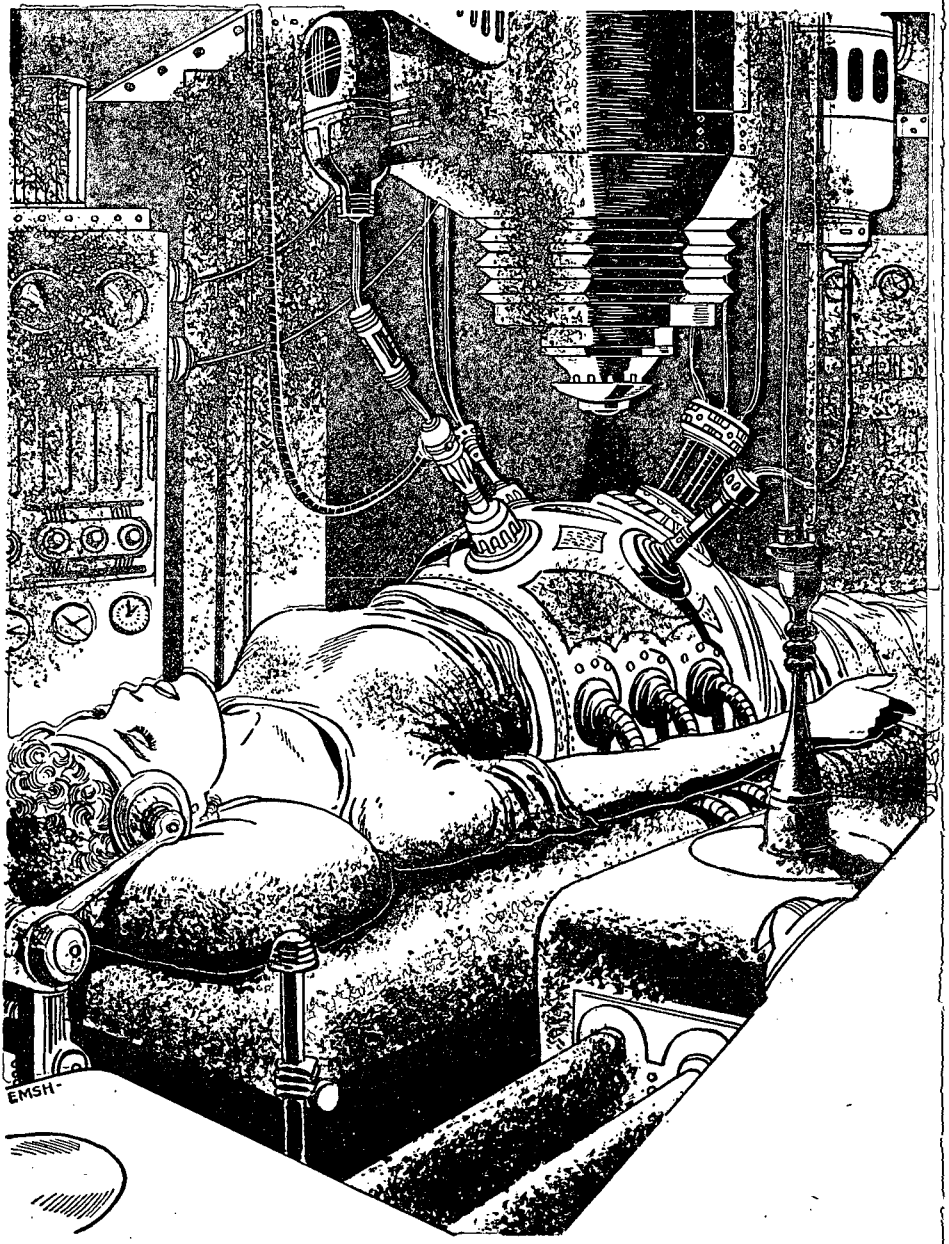

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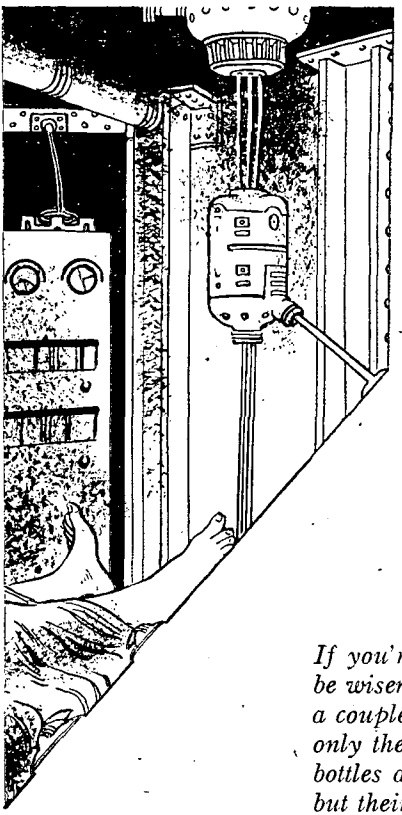

By JOSEPH SHALLIT

WONDER CHILD

If you're the parent of a new-born child you might be wiser to pass this story up entirely. It tells about a couple of nice people who would have liked a baby, only they didn't want to get fouled up with washing bottles and switching diapers. All wrong, of course, but their reasons seemed sound enough.

And then they met Dr. Elliott and his Maturator. A few jolts from his machine before the child is born, he claimed, and you'll have a junior genius on your hands. . . .

You'd like that? Sounds fine, hey? Well then, you'd better read Wonder Child after all!

"Why don't you two break down and have yourselves a baby?" Dr. Elliott said.

Roy Crowley pulled his pipe out of his mouth so that he could properly grimace at the little psychologist. "Aren't you tired of that line?" he said. And from the corner of the living room came Phyllis's voice: "Throw that guy out of here."

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"Let's be serious about this," Elliott said. "If you let this go much longer, the choice will be out of your hands — you won't be able to have a child."

"Uh-huh," Phyllis Crowley said. She was nested deep in a big upholstered chair, a sketch pad on her lap. She was making a pencil drawing of Moki, the black-and-white cat, which at the moment was curled up on the Magnavox.

"Hear that?" Roy Crowley grinned. "That ought to settle it. You can't have a baby if the wife is unwilling — and the husband is against it."

Elliott, a ruddy, round-faced, small-featured man, shook his head impatiently. "You can talk yourselves into it."

"Why?" Roy uncrossed his legs, stretched them out languidly and slumped back in his chair. "Why should we? I'm a writer. Phyllis is an artist. We both have plenty to keep us busy — a full day every day. We resent any little thing that steals our time. What's the point of adding another time-stealer to the house?"

"That's certainly a narrow attitude —"

"It certainly is," Roy said comfortably. "And we make no apologies for it. Why don't you have a baby yourself and stop bothering us?"

"I —" Elliott waved the question away — "some people are designed to be bachelors. That's beside the point. I'm talking about you. Perfect parents. The father tall, full-chested, intelligent. The mother —"

"Cut it out," Phyllis said.

"It's a fact," Elliott said. "All the chances are in favor of fine offspring."

"Look — don't misunderstand me — I'd love a fine offspring," Roy said. "If we could get him ready-made. I mean, finished enough to ship him off to school. But we're not going to let ourselves in for that drawn-out, miserable ordeal of sterilizing bottles, 2 a.m. feedings, toilet training. Lord, we wouldn't go through that for anything. Just can't afford the time. We've got lots more interesting things to do."

Elliott settled his pudgy body against the back of the chair, as if this was the point he'd been waiting for. "That period can be speeded up," he said softly.

"Speeded up? How?"

Elliott half closed his eyes. "Take my word for it. It can be speeded up. Not eliminated, of course. But accelerated enormously."

Roy made a skeptical throat-clearing noise. "What're you talking about, you phony brain carpenter? You mean to say you can cut down the diaper time?"

"Right. You happen to have picked the homeliest aspect possible, but all right — you have a

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limited imagination. I'm thinking not only of diaper time, but motor skills, language ability, socialization, and so on."

"You mean you can speed all that up?" Roy said, and without giving Elliott a chance to answer, "I don't believe it."

"I didn't think you would," Elliott said blandly. "I want you to come to my office and let me prove it to you."

"How?" Phyllis demanded from her corner. "How could you prove it?"

"Come and see. Tomorrow evening?"

Phyllis stood up out of her chair and fluffed out her orange dirndl. She was a slim, lithe, boyish figure, topped with dusty blonde hair cut in poodle style. "What are you trying to sell us, Doc?" she said.

"I want the two of you to come around tomorrow evening. I'll have the demonstration ready for you."

"Sorry," said Roy. "You're not going to finagle us into parenthood with any charts and graphs."

Phyllis gazed across the room at the psychologist. "What kind of demonstration do you mean?" she said quietly.

It was a large, well-lighted office, with pleasant pale green walls. Phyllis and Roy had seen it many times on social visits — Elliott's apartment was on the floor above — and every time they came they noticed some new gadget in it. Elliott, though an M.D. and specialist in pediatrics, had been drifting away from purely medical practice and concentrating more and more on psychological problems such as stammering and reading defects. He was constantly buying or developing new testing-and-training devices, but the gadget the Crowleys saw now was really a whopper.

It was about five feet high, and the width and length of a double bed. In fact, there was a leather couch inside it. At the four corners rose heavy black steel supports, suspending between them a squat, cylindrical affair roughly resembling an aerial camera. At one side, between two of the steel supports, was some sort of control panel.

"This is my darling," Elliott said, standing beside the machine and smiling with all the shyness of a new bridegroom. "You're looking at three years' work."

"Wonderful," said Roy. "What's it do — make waffles?"

"I'll show you what it does," Elliott said. He went through a door into the adjoining room, a classroom where he trained his reading cases, and came back with a gray kitten in his arms.

"Oh, isn't it darling!" said Phyllis, her hands reaching out for it.

"Yes, hold it a moment," Elliott said. "Notice, please, that

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this is a very young kitten — two and a half weeks old, to be exact."

He went out another door, into a washroom, and this time came back with a small cage. A white mouse scampered frantically inside.

Phyllis, cuddling the kitten, let out a squeak of protest. "All right now," Elliott said briskly, "let the kitten down on the floor and watch closely. Watch what it does."

He stooped and opened the cage door. The mouse didn't seem to recognize its freedom, and Elliott prodded it with his fountain pen until the mouse ran out on the green linoleum.

With a bound the kitten was after it. The chase went to the far corner of the room. It was over in a moment. The kitten's jaws snapped audibly. Phyllis moaned weakly and turned her face away, and the kitten came trotting across the floor with the limp white fur dangling from its teeth.

"Good boy," Elliott said. He scooped up the kitten, wrested the victim from its mouth and got rid of it in the washroom in some unseen way. He came back smiling. "What do you think of that kitten, eh?"

Phyllis's shoulders turned up, shuddering. "I think it's horrible."

"You've just seen a remarkable thing, though you don't seem to know it. You never saw a two-and-a-half week kitten run like that before. It ran like a full-grown cat. And most important, did you see the finesse with which it snapped —"

"Please!" Phyllis protested.

"Like any adult cat," Elliott said proudly.

"Hey," Roy broke in, "what's all this got to do with what you brought us here for?"

"That's exactly what I'm coming to," Elliott said amiably. He lowered his round little body into a leather chair across the room from them. "Listen." He brought a cigar out of his breast pocket and bit the tip off zestfully and worked up a big flame before he continued.

"If I asked you why a kitten kills a mouse, you'd probably say it's instinct. Wrong. There's no such instinct. The only thing that's inborn in the cat is a tendency to jump on small moving objects. That's all. It's a vague, generalized reaction. The specific technique of killing a mouse has to be *learned.* Most kittens learn it by watching the mother cat do it. Kittens who've never seen it done are likely never to become mousers. Some do, but they have quite a time before they learn the process themselves by trial and error. This, incidentally, isn't any theory of mine — it's been proven experimentally.

"Anyway, what I'm getting at is that this little kitten, which

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never saw a cat kill a mouse, simply pranced across the floor and assassinated a mouse the first time it saw one. That was a week ago. The kitten was just ten days old at the time. It fumbled a little on that first try, but only for nine or ten seconds; that was all the time it needed to figure it out. Who helped it learn that fast?" He blew out a big puff of smoke. "I did."

Roy and Phyllis gaped at each other. They burst into simultaneous laughter. "This I've got to see!" Roy howled. "Doc Elliott demonstrating how to catch a mouse."

"Please, please!" Elliott looked very pained. "I'm telling you about one of the most remarkable achievements in the whole range of animal psychology, and you make silly jokes! Now listen carefully, will you, please? This kitten's precociousness is all due to that machine, that handsome-looking thing in the corner. I call it the Maturator. Tentative name, but it gives you the idea. Before this kitten was born — during the final two weeks of its fetal life — its mother spent an hour each day anesthetized on that couch, with that bomb-shaped mechanism pressed to the spot in the abdomen where the kitten's head was. I determined that by fluoroscopy, of course. From the moment of birth, this kitten has been ahead of its litter mates in learning ability and agility. It has kept its lead, even increased it, day by day. Today it's roughly a month ahead of the others.

"The implications for us are obvious. If we do this for a human infant, it will go through stages that normally take months, in weeks. It should be out of the suckling stage in two, three weeks — walking in a couple of months — talking shortly after that. . . . Fantastic, isn't it?"

Roy stared at him silently. He could sense the taut wonder of Phyllis, close beside him. "You think I'd ever let her inside that crazy torture machine?" he growled.

Elliott raised his pale eyebrows daintily. "You're using pretty strong language about something you know nothing about, young man. Actually, no pain is felt at all. The only reason I anesthetized the cat was to keep it still. There's nothing mysterious or uncanny about this machine. The heart of it is merely a kind of induction coil. Basically, all it does is induce potentials in nerve fibers. Simple enough?"

"Sure," said Roy. "I don't get it," he added.

"Naturally. But stick with me. What gave me the whole idea was this: research over the last few years on human fetuses that had to be removed operatively has shown that the unborn child's nervous system is amazingly well

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developed at a very early age. By the end of the fourth month after conception, all the brain and nerve cells it will ever have are already formed. Not all operating, of course, but they're there. At fourteen weeks, the fetus can swallow. At sixteen weeks, it's already making breathing movements, though not actually breathing, since it's in a liquid medium. At eighteen weeks, it's opening and closing its hands. By the end of the sixth month, it's capable of sucking. These are all complicated things to do — many muscles and nerves involved.

"How did the fetus learn them? Instinct, you'll say. But that doesn't really tell us anything. Consider the act of sucking. Personally, I don't see any basic difference between sucking and an activity like whistling. What's the difference, actually? You'll probably say sucking is an instinctive action, while whistling is a learned action. But that's merely playing with words. The term 'instinct' doesn't mean anything really; it just confuses things. The only real difference between sucking and whistling is that the child learns the first before it's born and the second after it's born. The nerve tracts, the pathways needed for the act of whistling, are all there long, before the child is born. They're not activated — not plugged in, so to speak. Well, that's where this machine comes in."

Elliott heaved up out of his chair and trundled his little keg-shaped body to the machine in the corner. "This bomb-shaped mechanism in the center is a device that induces electrical potentials in objects brought near it. As you probably know — or perhaps you don't — such induction devices create a large magnetic field, extending indefinitely. My contribution is mainly a way of concentrating the field down to microscopic size. As a result, I can so direct it that the field affects only a few nerves at a time. I can pick and choose the nerves I want to activate.

"The rest ought to be obvious. The unborn infant's brain has all its nerve cells — an estimated nine billion — but most of them aren't plugged in yet. There's resistance at the plugs — the synapses, we call them. Very well. This machine of mine overcomes the synaptic resistance. It induces a current in a nerve — an impulse — that shoots across the synapse into the end-fibers of the next nerve. Once that pathway is opened up, it's in business — it's there for good.

"To get a better idea of what I mean, consider how you learned to ride a bike. You practiced and got discouraged and practiced some more, until finally you broke through the synaptic resistances and established new pathways. Once you did that, everything

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came easy. Even if you discontinued bicycling and tried it again five years later, you found you got over your rustiness in a few minutes and were able to coast along as well as ever. Why? Because once those nerve pathways were established, they were there for good, always ready for you to use them.

"Well, that's what I do for the baby by my artificial method. I stimulate selected nerves into forming pathways. When the child is born and has to learn things, the pathways are already there. No laborious practice is necessary. Just a few trials, and it's coasting along. It's really wonderful. I wish somebody had done it to me in my prenatal days."

"Somebody should have done *something* to you, anyway," Roy said

Elliott wrinkled his little round face at him. "What're you whining about?"

"You have the gall to expect people to let you monkey around with their kids like that? Suppose you addle the kid's brain?"

"Impossible." Elliott closed his thin lips firmly. "I'm not changing a single brain cell. All I'm doing is activating some pathways that are dormant — waiting."

"Tell me something," Phyllis said. "Isn't it awfully complicated in there — I mean, all those brain cells and things. How do you know which ones to — to give a push to?"

"Good question." Elliott glowed at her gratefully. "An awful lot of work's been done these last few years on localization of cerebral functions, both in animals and humans. They've really got things down to fine points. For example, they have the speech center so precisely identified that by electrically stimulating that part of the brain during surgery, they can actually make the larynx give out sounds, practically talk. But with all this wealth of new knowledge, nobody has made any practical use of it in a developmental way. Until Elliott came along."

"And you've already tried this out on some babies?" Roy asked.

"No. The first will be yours."

"Whose?"

"The lucky Crowleys will be the first in history to have all the pleasure of bringing up their child without fuss or trouble."

"Doc, somebody else'll have to make history," Roy said. "It's not our line. Right, Phyllis?"

She didn't seem to hear. "Doc," she said, "tell us some more. . . ."

There was a long silence in the car as Roy and Phyllis drove home. Finally he said, "I never knew you wanted a baby."

"You never asked," she said quietly.

"But you always derided the idea," he protested.

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"That was only because you were against it."

"But I never was against it. I always thought you were. You always were afraid of anything that would interfere with our careers —"

"Apparently that won't happen now with the Doc's new system."

"Well, I've always been in favor of a baby."

"Then won't you tell me so now, please?"

It was an easy birth. The obstetrician used little anesthesia — just nitrous oxide in small dosage. He wanted to use more, but Elliott talked Phyllis into standing the extra pain. He was afraid deep anesthesia might block off some of the pathways he had opened. "No use taking a chance," he told her, "after all the trouble we've gone to."

She had visited his office daily during the last three months and spent an hour under the machine each time. She had read or sketched; she hadn't minded it at all. "Like going to the hairdresser's," she had said.

The baby was a boy, pure cornsilk blond, blue-eyed, eight and one-half pounds, husky, well-shaped. They named it Donald Lee Crowley. Elliott came to crow over it, and Roy practically had to eject him from Phyllis's room when nursing time came. "God-dammit, you think you're the father?" Roy howled at him. "If I catch you handing out cigars —!"

"I've put in a lot of time and expense on this project," Elliott said huffily. "I don't want to see it spoiled by a bungling busybody like you."

They didn't say a word to the obstetrician about the treatments Phyllis had been given, and he didn't seem to notice anything unusual. Donald squawled, just like other infants. He yawned and sneezed. He regurgitated. He swallowed air and had to be burped. And he dripped like a broken faucet.

"Hey," Roy shouted at Elliott over the phone. "What's the deal? We going to have this yowling and dripping indefinitely? Phyllis and the baby are going home day after tomorrow, and we haven't seen a damn thing yet."

"Be patient —"

"Patient? I'll break your greasy little neck. Didn't you promise we wouldn't have any trouble? Do I have to spend my nights now walking a yowling baby and getting drenched down my front?"

"All right," Elliott said calmly. "I went easy on the motor association area, but if you're so all-fired impatient, I'll reinforce those pathways. Bring the baby here when you leave the hospital. I'll give it three solid hours in the Maturator. That ought to speed things up for you, if that's what you want."

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"If that's what I want? Holy hell, man, don't you believe in doing a job right? You got us into this — get us out of it."

On the tenth day, Roy brought Phyllis and Donald home, stopping en route at Elliott's place for the treatment. The next day, Elliott came calling. He had a wire recorder with him. "I'm going to leave this in the baby's room. Turn it on when he's especially vocal. I think the speech development will give us our most significant record. I really put some juice into Broca's area, the speech center."

He bent over the crib and tickled Donald's middle. "Say! You notice something? Notice how he lies, with his arms almost straight out?"

"Is that unusual?" Phyllis said.

"Sure is. Babies lie fairly continuously in the fetal posture, arms flexed and hands near the face, until about four weeks. This child's not even two."

"You mean that everything's going to —?"

"Let's keep our fingers crossed — but it looks good," Elliott bragged. "It looks good."

When Elliott came around again, after a lapse of three days, Roy left his typewriter and came downstairs to greet him. "Doc, I've got to give you credit. Things are easing up — the kid's crying less and less. Hardly even cries when he's hungry. It's getting to be livable around here again."

The pudgy red face puffed up ecstatically. "I told you! I told you!" He turned with a bird-like dart of his head to Phyllis. "What does he do when he's hungry — just fuss around?"

"That's right," Phyllis said. "Just sort of squirms around and makes little noises, as if he's talking to himself."

"Won-derful! You know what that means? The eight-week level, at least! My God, this is even better than I anticipated. The eight-week level at two weeks!"

He followed them into the nursery. "What kind of sounds does he make?"

"Well," Phyllis reflected, "sort of cooing."

"Cooing!" Elliott sounded as if he were cooing himself. "You have it recorded?"

"I think so."

He listened to the machine play back the baby's vocalizations. "Definitely cooing," he said. "That's eight weeks. Yes, sir, eight weeks minimum."

"When," said Phyllis hesitantly, "when do you think we can start . . . toilet training?"

"At this rate of acceleration, I'd say in another ten days."

"You're not kidding?"

"Ten days," Elliott said firmly.

During the succeeding week, the third of Donnie's life, the fol-

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lowing events took place, to the accompaniment of Elliott's mounting excitement: the baby developed good head balance; he clutched a toy; when shown his face in the mirror, he smiled and patted it; he said something that sounded like "ma" ("six-month level!" Elliott shouted).

During the fourth week of Donnie's life, he got up to two-syllable words — mama and dada — learned to wave bye-bye and even to say it, responded to his name, learned to play pat-a-cake. In the middle of this week, Phyllis introduced him to the mysteries of the pot. By the end of the following week, he had mastered it.

There was enormous jubilation in the Crowley household when this was accomplished. Roy broke out the bottle of Napoleon brandy. He and Phyllis got pretty high. They even gave Donnie a lick of it. He beamed his pleasure and said "moh moh," but they didn't let him have any more. They didn't want a dipso in the family.

At the age of six weeks, Donnie Crowley was dressing himself — everything but tying the shoelaces — handling his own spoon at table, keeping himself busy with toys. Phyllis was able to get in four hours of painting a day. Roy was at his typewriter almost without hindrance. It was a happy household.

In fact, the only source of difficulty was the neighbors. They were too curious; they noticed things; they asked questions. Neither Roy nor Phyllis wanted to tell anybody about the business with the Maturator. They were uncomfortable about it; they vaguely felt it would be almost like confessing some other man had fathered the child.

But what could they do when the neighbors dropped in and found Donnie at the table feeding himself? You could see their suspicions. What kind of baby was this? Some sort of freak? It couldn't be six weeks old. Maybe the Crowleys had lost their baby and adopted an older one and were trying to palm it off as their own. *Something* was funny. . . .

Donnie happened to be somewhat big for his age; not extraordinarily so, but noticeably above average. How old? the neighbors would repeat slyly. How old did you say? It was very uncomfortable. Particularly since Roy and Phyllis were always self-conscious about the story they were concealing. The neighbors could sense their feeling of guiltiness. It was a complication that Roy and Phyllis had never anticipated. They found themselves forced to act cold to their favorite neighbors in order to discourage visits. Every marvelous new progression in Donnie's development was a cause for anxiety: suppose the neighbors noticed. The gossip going around was unimaginable.

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Roy and Phyllis felt as if they were living in some frontier outpost, surrounded by enemies, spies and traitors.

By the time Donnie reached his first birthday, the Crowleys had managed to alienate every one of their neighbors. Phyllis arranged a party — a wistful affair — just the three of them and a little cake with one candle. There were still a few friends who would have brought their children, but Roy and Phyllis were too afraid to invite them. The experience of watching Donnie for three or four hours would have been too staggering. The guests would have seen a one-year-old boy who used phrases like "What is that?" and "I don't like it" with precise enunciation; who could walk, run and climb; who could even get somewhere with an erector set.

Elliott came around the next day with congratulations and a gift book — *Bobbie and Janie at the Fair* — which was listed for the three- and four-year level.

"It's time you started a little socialization," he said. "Kid's got to start playing with the neighbors' kids."

"Oh, no," Phyllis whimpered.

"Got to. Don't you want the child to develop properly?"

"It won't work out. The neighbors all think Donnie's queer."

"The devil with what they think. I'm not interested in them. I'm interested in seeing that Donald develops to his full potentialities. You'd better start letting him out in the garden to play with the other kids. Better start right away."

"But you don't know. . . ." Phyllis said.

He didn't. The thing fizzled from the very start. When Donnie came out to play, it promptly became meal time or nap time for the neighbors' kids. Or else little Jimmie was sick — bad cold — certainly wouldn't want your Donnie to catch it. Phyllis tried bravely to overcome the neighbors' resistance, but after two weeks of continuous rebuffs, she gave up, limp and disheartened. Donnie sat in the living room and plaintively asked where Jimmie and Billie were — he wanted to play with Jimmie and Billie. Phyllis couldn't work up any satisfactory answer. She had to spend more and more of her time playing with him, keeping him busy. Her time at the easel was cut down to hardly more than an hour a day. She took to painting at night, after Donnie went to sleep; but she had always been accustomed to painting by daylight, and the electric light drove her mad.

"Roy," she wailed, "how did we ever get into this? It's killing me — I haven't turned out a decent painting in months."

"It's knocking hell out of my writing, too," Roy said. "God,

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this never occurred to me at all. I thought if he matured early, he'd use up less of our time. It's worked exactly the other way around."

"What're we going to do?"

"I don't know. Say! Wait a minute. How about a nursery school? Sure. Why don't we enroll him in there?"

Phyllis shook her head miserably. "They don't take one-year-olds."

"Who says he's one year old? He's three. They won't ask for his birth certificate. Maybe he's a little small for three — but not very much so, at that. Put him in with three-year-olds and he'll be right where he belongs — get along fine."

Next morning Roy drove Donnie to the Hopewell Nursery School, on the other side of town. He scanned the names of the parents of the children enrolled, and didn't spot any he knew. Fine. "Donnie's three," he told the registrar without a quiver.

It was a brilliant idea, as Phyllis conceded on the second day. Donnie loved the place. He got along splendidly with the other children. He was full of talk when he came home at noon — full of Jerry and Tommy and Mary and Nancy. Miss Lawson, the supervisor, reported he was a model child. If the Crowleys would like to enroll Donnie in the afternoon session as well as the morning one, with lunch at the school, she thought the child was quite mature enough to stand the long absence from home.

They tried it. It worked out fine. The Crowley house was a peaceful, noiseless haven from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. every day except Sunday. Donnie was drawing pictures now. After his first week at the school, he was promoted to the drawing class for specially gifted four- and five-year-olds. In another week, he was making sketches which Miss Lawson thought were remarkable representations of human and animal figures. "Of course," she said to Phyllis, "I'm sure Mrs. Crowley must give him lots of coaching."

"Uhm-uhm," Phyllis mumbled. She had never shown him how to draw a line. The boy had picked it all up in his few sessions in the drawing class. The pictures *were* pretty remarkable for a three-year-old. But Donnie, she kept forgetting — Donnie was only a little over one!

"Roy," said Phyllis awesomely, "we've got a prodigy on our hands."

"I don't think so," Roy said. "He's ahead of his age — we know that — but it'll all even out as he gets older."

One afternoon, the phone jangled and an excited Miss Lawson was on the phone. They'd have to come for Donnie, they'd have to

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come for him right this minute. Did they understand? The boy was unfit to associate with decent children. If that was the way Mrs. Crowley brought up her child —!

Roy drove to the school and managed to extract the story from the incoherent Miss Lawson. Donnie had been making what Miss Lawson considered pornographic sketches. Roy got a look at them. One, he could see at once, represented himself taking a shower. He recalled that the previous week Donnie had strayed into the bathroom while he was in the glass shower. The boy hadn't left anything out of his sketch; in fact, he rather exaggerated some features. Another sketch was evidently inspired by a glimpse Donnie had caught of his mother in one of her filmier nightgowns.

Roy went into the public phone booth outside the school office and called Elliott. "What are they so excited about?" the psychologist said. "The boy is only showing the normal sexual curiosity of a five-year-old."

"But they think he's three and a half," Roy whispered. "And he's actually one and a half."

"Makes no difference. He's psychologically at the five-year level. Getting closer to six. You have to expect such behavior."

"But what should I do? They want to kick him out of the school."

"Well . . ." Elliott grumbled. "Tell them to take his crayons away. He doesn't have to draw. Let them keep him busy with basketwork or weaving — something like that."

Miss Lawson was finally appeased. Very well, she said, Donnie could stay if he behaved. But she did want to say that Mrs. Crowley certainly showed poor judgment in the subjects she taught her child to delineate.

Donnie's interest in drawing disappeared readily. His new fascination was books. He was the most attentive child at the story hour, she grudgingly reported. He always maneuvered himself to the seat beside her, and was already picking out some of the words as she read them.

But the peace lasted only three more weeks. This time when Miss Lawson phoned, she was adamant. Donnie Crowley couldn't stay in the Hopewell Nursery School another minute. Roy cursed and abandoned his typewriter again and took a fast drive to the school. Miss Lawson flatly refused to say what Donnie had done this time. It was unspeakable. Roy hunted up the registrar, who had already investigated the incident. What, it seemed, Donnie had done was to raise his hand during the reading of a fairy tale and inquire how the queen could have a baby if the king had been away at the wars for five years.

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"Every kid in the world is curious about sex," Roy complained. "They all ask such questions."

"Not at the age of three," the registrar said. "It shows a morbid preoccupation with sex, to say the least. It's very disruptive to our other children. I'm afraid we can't have this sort of thing around here."

Roy dispiritedly put Donnie in the car and drove home. Donnie kept looking at him worriedly, his blue eyes crinkled, his little button nose turned up at his father. "What did I do, Daddy?" he said plaintively.

"You little brat," Roy said.

Phyllis was waiting for them. Roy had to take Donnie to his room and close the door before he could tell her what had happened. "Can't even talk in front of the kid," he said bitterly.

"We'll have to find another nursery school, that's all," Phyllis said.

"What's the use? He'd only do something else to get himself expelled."

He jerked up the phone and dialed Elliott's number. As soon as the psychologist answered, Roy poured a tirade into his ear.

"Take it easy," Elliott said. "He's gotten too advanced for nursery school anyway. I'm ready to take over now."

"You? What do you mean?"

"I've got a class of six- to eight-year-olds who come here for reading and speech problems. Donald ought to be just about their level. He can spend at least four hours a day here. And it's all on the house, of course; I want the chance to really watch him from now on."

Phyllis didn't like it. "I'm not sure Doc Elliott is the best kind of influence, or example, for a child."

"Darn right he isn't," Roy said. "But what're we going to do? What can we do with the kid all day? We've got to send him somewhere."

Within two months after Donnie started in Elliott's private class, he was reading, with only slight assistance, such books as *The Poky Little Puppy*, *The Leaky Whale* and *Ted and Nina Go to the Grocery Store*. A few weeks after that, he was up to *The Story of Ferdinand*, *Winnie the Pooh* and *A Child's Garden of Verses*. He was even making up rudimentary poems of his own.

"Fantastic," Roy said. "Phyllis, we've got a literary genius on our hands."

"Heaven preserve us from any such," said Phyllis. "I'd drown the poor little tyke before I'd let him become a writer."

"I wonder," Roy mused. "I wonder if Doc Elliott can teach him how to type. . . ."

Now Donnie was deep in books, he was a bookworm, a bibliophile, a bibliomaniac. He was reading,

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or trying to read, everything in the Crowley library. Now the days became a constant barrage of questions. "What does *peripheral* mean, Daddy?" "What does it mean when it says, 'Art during this period was hampered by a severe academicism'?" Roy didn't mind this too much; he got a kick out of seeing Donnie's growing command of language, and he soon took the pressure off himself by teaching the boy how to use the unabridged dictionary.

But Donnie's wide reading began to become annoying when he got onto the innocent-question gag. It would go like this: "Daddy, how many bones does a person have?" "Thousand or so," Roy would say carelessly. "Two hundred and six!" Donnie would cry in triumph and derision.

That sort of thing got under Roy's skin after a while. He found himself rereading books he hadn't looked at in years. Science books particularly. Donnie was rapidly stuffing himself with facts covering the whole range of natural history. Roy experienced a definite feeling of tension every time Donnie asked a question; he never knew whether it was a sincere request for information or just a trap.

One evening, while Roy and Phyllis were watching television — Donnie was in his room, too busy reading to spend his time this way — the idea suddenly hit Roy. He pointed excitedly at the screen. "That — that's what I'm going to do!"

"What?" said Phyllis. There was a Milton Berle show on. At the moment, Milton happened to be getting amorous with a girl in tights. "What?" said Phyllis more sharply.

"Not this program," Roy said impatiently. "Thursday night. Junior Quizmasters. Why didn't I think of it before? He'll be terrific!"

Phyllis stared at him. "What do you want to do that for?"

"Use up some of that energy. Keep him busy. Give some motive, some direction to his reading. And make a few bucks in the process."

"Does a two-year-old child have to earn his own living?" Phyllis said acidly.

"He's not two. He's at least seven. Maybe nine or ten. Ask Doc Elliott."

The program director fell in love with Donnie at first sight. So did the producer and the sponsor's representative. That rounded innocent face, the pale blue eyes, the golden blond hair . . . Every kid in the panel was dark brunet — visual monotony. The executives had been hunting for a blond prodigy for months. When Donnie handled a dozen of their practice questions with only two slight errors, they whipped a contract

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out. Seventy-five dollars a week, with a raise to a hundred if he weathered the four-week trial period successfully.

"Can I borrow your pen?" said Roy.

They didn't wait four weeks; they raised Donnie to a hundred after the second program. The mail response had been terrific. TV Digest scheduled Donnie for a cover picture, and John Crosby did a whole column on this brilliant five-year-old (the age Roy had settled on) who had none of the obnoxious cuteness and affectations of most juvenile performers.

Roy, who had been running into a dry spell in his writing and was beginning to worry about finances, now found he could relax a little. Phyllis, however, was worried. "It's unnatural, all this fuss and glamor, for a two-year-old child," she said. "It'll make it even harder for him to adjust to other children."

But, actually, the social part of Donnie's life improved. The neighbors, suddenly discovering they had a celebrity in their midst, quickly warmed to the Crowleys. They were willing now to overlook the Crowleys' previous attempt to pass off their grown child as an infant. It was just one of those eccentricities artists go in for, the neighbors decided indulgently. Wouldn't the Crowleys please drop in? And it certainly would be very sweet if little Donnie came to play with their children.

Roy promptly discontinued Donnie's attendance at Doc Elliott's clinic. Elliott protested that Donnie needed his personal attention, but Roy said firmly, "It's time he learned to play with normal kids." Donnie now became a member of the seven- to nine-year social set. He was shorter than his playmates, but not punier. He was sturdy-boned and firm-muscled, and he held his own in all their games.

Now got under way a new era of peace and security in the Crowley household. Donnie was well balanced, well adjusted, a source of nothing but parental pride. Roy, of course, wasn't doing much writing any more. He was too busy handling Donnie's interests. Donnie had his own show now — A Day with Donnie — in addition to the Quizmasters thing, and that meant Roy had to make two trips to New York each week with him. Then there were the other matters: Donnie's Oats, the new breakfast cereal; Donnie Denims, the two-piece outfits that were selling by the thousands in the department stores; Donnie's Quiz Book; the Donniehat, a modified mortarboard; Donnie's Own Chemistry Set; the Donniecycle, a bicycle with a horn that squeaked "I know"; and Donnie Tablets, Your Children's Favorite Way of

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Taking Vitamins. Roy had to handle the royalty arrangements on all of those.

In addition, there were fan mail, pinup pictures, interviews, personal appearances. Merely handling the tax complications was a job in itself. Donnie was getting $26,000 a year on his TV shows, and the royalties came to about $30,000 more. Roy was claiming a high rate of depreciation on Donnie, since obviously he'd stop making dough as soon as he got out of the kid stage; but the local tax office wouldn't allow the claim, and Roy was fighting it out in the courts.

Only Phyllis seemed discontented with all this prosperity. "I thought you were a writer," she said.

"Good God, woman," Roy barked at her, "I never made more than seven thousand in my best years."

"I thought you loved your work."

"What are you talking about? This is something *big*. Do you realize next year we'll have Donnie up to at least a hundred thousand?"

Unfortunately, Donnie's social life began to give trouble again. By the time he was three, his seven- and eight-year-old neighbors utterly bored him. Roy had to scout around and find some nines and tens for him to play with. But Donnie used them up in a few months, and Roy had to go out hunting again. It got to be an annoying problem.

Roy finally hit on the idea of *hiring* friends for Donnie. He got them through a talent agency. He contracted for a team of four boys who came to visit Donnie according to a formal schedule of working hours. When Donnie squeezed them dry, in about three months, Roy got the agency to send over a new batch. Donnie surmised that the boys were being paid for their visits, but he didn't mind. "I understand I have to complete my social integration in one way or another," he said. "And this seems the best way."

Shortly after Donnie reached the age of five — he was playing with fourteen-year-olds then — calamity struck: Donnie broke a boy's arm. It was during a baseball game. Donnie was playing with his hired troupe plus some of the bigger boys of the neighborhood. One of the neighbor boys got ready to bat, and Donnie insisted it was his turn, and when the other boy refused to give in, Donnie twisted the bat loose and calmly fractured the boy's forearm.

The victim's parents sued for twenty-five thousand dollars. Roy quickly settled out of court for five. He was furious. Not so much at Donnie or the money-grubbing neighbors as he was angry at Doc Elliott.

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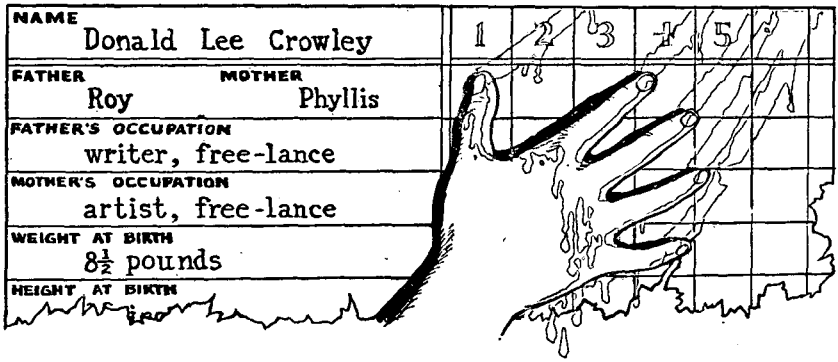

"For God's sake," Roy stormed, "you were supposed to mature the kid's mind. Who said anything about developing his muscles? He's so goddam strong — he's like a little weight-lifter."

"You'd prefer him to be a weakling?" Elliott said harshly.

"Just normal!" Roy shouted. "That's all. Just normal."

"I'm sorry. I should've thought you'd be pleased, but there's no telling what goes on in that so-called brain of yours. You'll just have to bear with the situation. What's happened, of course, is that the prodding we gave the nerves caused them to branch out more — their axons sent extra fibers ramifying through the muscles. The constant stimulation of those extra fibers caused the muscles to develop faster. That's all. Sort of the reverse of what happens in polio, where deterioration of the nerves causes the muscles to shrivel."

"What good does this explanation do me?"

"Listen, you ungrateful chump, what do you want your boy to be — a pushover? Somebody was trying to take his place at bat. He wouldn't stand for it. What's wrong with that?"

"He didn't have to break the boy's arm, dammit."

"That's only an incident. The important thing is that Donnie has enough aggressiveness to see that his rights are recognized."

"Don't you think maybe it's too damn much aggressiveness?"

"Too much for now, perhaps. But remember — Donnie is a boy of the future. He must be ready for the world as it will be when he's older. Society is becoming more competitive year by year. You think things are hectic in the world today, but wait till another generation has passed. It'll *really* be dog-eat-dog then. Donnie has to be prepared for that. If he doesn't have a highly developed competitiveness, he'll go under."

Roy was too angry to carry on the conversation. He stalked out

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of Elliott's office without a goodbye. That's the last time, he told himself; I'll never have anything to do with that jerk again.

But within two weeks, Roy was ringing him up on the phone. "Why did I ever get connected with a crumb like you?" he howled.

"What's the trouble now?" Elliott said calmly.

"Everything! That damned competitiveness of yours — it's gotten out of hand. Donnie can't play with *anybody* now. Even the boys we're paying — they're all quitting. He's intolerable. He just knocked one down — knocked out two teeth. I'll have a lawyer's letter in the morning."

"What did he knock the boy down for?" Elliott asked curiously.

"Nothing. Some silly thing about the boy's making a scoring mistake in a tennis game."

"I see," Elliott said blandly. "Donnie's coming along splendidly."

"*What?*"

"Certainly. Nobody's going to get the better of *him*. He's a real boy of the future."

"What's this boy of the future stuff?" Roy yelled.

"Stop shouting in my ear and I'll tell you. In the future, all intelligent parents will pre-condition their children the way we did with Donald. It's the only way the child will be able to survive in the fierce competition that will prevail then. You know, I've made a study of the competitive tenor of society for the past hundred years. When you put the data on a graph, you see it getting steeper and steeper until now it's almost a vertically ascending line. I tell you, Crowley, every competitive aspect of our society will be intensified a thousandfold within the next two generations. Donnie is a boy for that age. I saw very carefully to that."

"You mean . . . you *deliberately* made him competitive?" Roy said hoarsely.

"Certainly. Of course, competitiveness isn't a simple trait that you can localize in one part of the brain. But we stimulated his motor area and also the hypothalamus, the emotional center, at the expense of the prefrontal area, which is the part of the brain involved with restraint, self-denial and similar traits. In that way, we achieved a stronger drive — a more untrammeled will, you might say. Which now manifests itself in competitiveness, among other things."

"You never told me anything about this before."

"For gosh sakes, man, I couldn't tell you everything. You wouldn't have understood it anyway. It's all part of a complicated plan — everything in the brain is interrelated. This whole thing was very

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carefully charted out before I ever went into it."

"If I'd ever known we were going to have all this trouble —"

"Do you know you disgust me?" Elliott snapped at him. "You absolutely make me sick. Whining to me like this . . . You didn't complain when you were spared the little unpleasantnesses other people go through when they have children. You were quite happy to get all the benefits I was able to give you, weren't you? In fact, you were pretty impatient with the least inconvenience — you insisted I put the child through another round in the Maturator, didn't you? Furthermore, you seem to be quite content to exploit the child's abilities and squeeze every last dollar you can out of him. You haven't whined about that —"

"Skip it," Roy snarled, and slammed down the receiver.

Now alone, without playmates, Donnie began to become moody, irritable, snappish. Roy and Phyllis began to find it very hard to manage him. It struck Roy that the boy's competitive impulses, which had found their outlet in play with other boys, was now being vented on them. But knowing the explanation didn't make it pleasanter, or excusable in Roy's eyes. All the fancy terms in all the psychology books couldn't alter the fact that the boy was simply being bad. He was surly to his father. He talked back to his mother. He complained continuously. He was dissatisfied with everything. He wanted to run the whole house.

One day, he was sitting in a chair, twanging a piece of wire. Phyllis told him to stop — then went over and snatched the wire from his hands. Donnie jumped up and punched her, full in the chest. Roy was coming in the door just as it happened. He ran over and grabbed the boy and gave him a licking, an old-fashioned, non-scientific licking. It was a fierce struggle — the boy was very strong — but Roy got him over his knee and applied his hand with all the bitterness he'd been storing up.

He let up only when his arm tired. He ordered the boy to go to his room. Donnie did as he was told; but he walked away with a defiant swing in his shoulders. And just before he passed through the doorway, he turned and gave Roy a look. A look that shocked Roy to his depths. It wasn't a boy's hurt look, a look of understandable resentment or bitterness. It was a stone-hard, stone-cold malevolence; a look of cold, unfeeling separateness, of unrelatedness. . . .

From then on, the Crowleys had a stranger in the house. A stranger whom they had once trustfully taken in and who had proved to be

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an enemy. He would not sit at the table with them. He would not speak. He ignored everything they said. He refused to go to the television studio — the networks were told he was sick and they'd have to get a substitute. He spent days just sitting in the living room and staring at his parents. Phyllis was becoming frantic. "He'll drive me mad," she whimpered.

"That's what he's trying to do," Roy said. "Hold tight."

Donald's sixth birthday arrived. Suddenly, hysterically, Phyllis was all afire with plans for a party. She wanted it rich, complete, a gay, frolicsome time, the way most of their previous ones had been. She was sure the magic of the lighted candles would revive all the close, warm happiness of their previous years. "I'm going to bake the cake myself," she said, tense and flushed. "Roy, you go out and buy decorations — all kinds — everything —"

"For that monster?" Roy said grimly.

"Roy — please!"

He went out. He drove to the variety store, gave the salesgirl a ten-dollar bill and told her to load a bag with birthday-party decorations — he'd be back and pick them up. Then he drove to Elliott's place.

He found Elliott in the classroom giving blackboard instruction to half a dozen children. Roy waved him into the office. As soon as they were inside, Roy closed the door and grabbed the psychologist by the lapels.

"Where's that plan?" he gritted.

"What — what's the matter?" Elliott trembled.

"That plan — the chart that tells the kind of boy you were trying to make. Where is it?"

"You — you wouldn't understand —"

Roy dragged him across the room to the desk. "Get it out!" He twisted the lapels across Elliott's throat.

"I d-don't have it —" Elliott choked, struggling to free himself.

"Get it out!" Roy twisted the lapels tighter. But suddenly, he saw it. It was right there on top of the desk. Elliott had evidently been reviewing it. A brown folder, with a typewritten title: *Prospectus: The Child of the Future.*

Roy flung the little psychologist aside, sent him tumbling halfway across the floor. He ripped the folder open. A thick sheaf of typewritten pages, more than a hundred of them. He riffled through them. Charts of the brain. Nerve pathways. A diagram of the Maturator. A long discussion of trends of social competition. The requirements for successful living in the years ahead. Roy kept turning impatiently. Abruptly he stopped. Here it was. A list, month by month, of anticipated levels of be-

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havior. The words the child was expected to use at each stage. Toilet behavior. Feeding behavior. Sex interests. Attitudes toward playmates, parents. Roy read quickly. He came to the Sixth Year. His flesh became cold and crawling as he read:

In the child of the future, the thoroughly Maturated Child, the sixth year should mark a high development of his competitive drive; so high, that it will now turn naturally against his parents and quickly destroy them, as impediments to his further development. His expanded physical powers should make this easily feasible. . . .

Roy hurled the papers away and started grimly toward Elliott.

"It's — it's only theoretical — the future —" Elliott stammered. "I'll —"

The psychologist fled through the doorway.

Roy stopped. He rushed back to the desk, grabbed the phone and dialed his own number. His heart pounded. "Phyllis! Are you all right?"

"Of course," she said. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing — nothing — Look, I'm coming right home. I'm bringing what you wanted. What are you doing now? Where's the boy?"

"He's in his room. I'm making the cake. What *is* the matter?"

"Nothing at all — just a — What color icing are you making?"

"White and pink. Why?"

"Make it green," he gritted.

"Green? Why on earth —?"

"Do as I say! Make it green."

"Well, if you're so insistent . . ."

Elliott was nowhere in sight when Roy strode through the classroom. He went out and got into his car and sped to the variety store. His package was ready. He carried it to the garden counter. "Give me a can of Paris green," he said.

The clerk took the skull-marked can off the shelf. "Anything else, sir?"

"That'll be all I need," Roy said.

He drove home quickly. Phyllis needn't know anything about it — ever. He'd figure out some excuse to get her and the boy out of the room while he cut the cake and fixed up the boy's slice. It struck Roy that he had already, unwittingly, paved the way for this outcome by telling the television people the boy was sick. When he died, there would be no inquest, no investigation — not if Doc Elliott filled out the death certificate as a natural death. And he'd have to. Roy had a story that could ruin him if he balked.

There couldn't be any hitch. Roy felt a huge sense of release and freedom as he walked up the front steps. He unlocked the door.

And heard, faintly, his wife's last despairing cry.

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LOVE IS A BAROMETER

By DEL MOLARSKY

Like most folks, we've always spoken highly of love. It keeps the credit jeweler open every night until nine, and the song writers busy knocking out jingles about the moon and June. And then there's the birth rate, but you'd know about that.

But Del Molarsky shows us a more practical side to love. He knows a young man (at least he says he does) who can control the weather by the way his love life goes. Let Ogden's girl give him the cold shoulder and snow falls for a week; let her turn on a brilliant smile and the sale of sun-glasses hits a new high! All of which makes Love is a Barometer one of the most delightful fantasies we have yet presented.

AND since thirty-two point three per cent of all the official weather reports are incorrect," emphasized Ogden Birdley, "think what it would mean to your readers if they could depend upon your weather predictions one hundred per cent of the time. Now, if you employ me —"

"I assume," interrupted the editor of the *Finleyville Gazette*, "that you represent some scientific group."

"I do not," replied the young man indignantly, drawing himself up to his full five feet four inches.

"Oh, you do it all by yourself," said the editor with growing suspicion. "Where do you get your equipment, balloons, et cetera?"

"Mr. Lewis, I do *not* use balloons," said Ogden.

"No balloons," mumbled the editor with a sly smile; then, thumbing through a pile of papers on his desk, he added impatiently, "I'm a very busy man; I'm especially busy today because I'm taking tomorrow off to hunt grouse. Good day, Mr. Birdley."

The blood rushed up to the roots of Ogden's stubby red hair and an angry hue glowed through the peach-fuzz on his round face. "I'll be back tomorrow," he finally spluttered.

"Yes, a good idea," said the editor. "Any time when I'm not here."

"You'll be here," said Og-

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den, blinking furiously behind the thick lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses. Then he turned and bolted out of the office.

The following day Ogden Birdley was back.

"Oh, it's you again," groaned the editor. "I thought I told you I was going —" He stopped short. "Very interesting," he concluded, smiling quizzically.

"I knew you wouldn't hunt grouse in the rain," said Ogden.

"Hmmmmm, and the official report said fair for today," mused the editor.

"The official report says fair for tomorrow too," said Ogden, picking up his raincoat. "But I'll be back again tomorrow, and so will you. Good day, Mr. Lewis."

It was still raining when Ogden returned the next day.

"And no balloons," muttered the editor, scratching his head. "Well, young Bert Hudson bags more grouse with bow and arrow than I do with my telescopic sights. Well, do I hunt tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow will be fair," replied Ogden, with quiet satisfaction.

"Mr. Birdley," exclaimed the editor, slamming his palm on the desk, "if I hunt tomorrow, you're hired."

Two days later Mr. Lewis was back at his desk grinning like a schoolboy. Across from him sat Ogden Birdley.

"Now, regarding salary," said the young man, blinking earnestly over the tops of his glasses. "All I ask is enough to keep myself and my ants alive."

"Aunts," gasped Mr. Lewis. "How many?"

"Some people hunt grouse," replied Ogden. "I spend my time studying the habits of the ant."

"Oh," gulped Mr. Lewis.

"The outcome of my studies may prove to be of the greatest significance to mankind. In the meantime, I must earn enough to support myself and the ants. Will fourteen dollars a week be too much to ask for my services?"

"It's a deal," said Mr. Lewis, a little too quickly.

After that the editor never missed a hunting date because of an incorrect weather forecast. Ogden boarded at a farm house near the outskirts of the town, contentedly studying the habits of the ant. Once a day he would phone Mr. Lewis, who would secretly tear up the official bulletin and replace it with Ogden Birdley's report.

Those first weeks were uneventful. But soon the folks of Finleyville began to notice that the weather reports on the radio sometimes differed from those of the *Finleyville Gazette*, and they quickly caught on to the fact that the *Gazette* never missed. The question naturally arose as to how it all happened, and many were

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the conjectures. Some claimed the paper owned a new kind of radar equipment that the government was testing. Many swore it was Grampa Dawson's rheumatic leg, and that there was nothing in the least unusual about the whole thing. And of course there were the doubting Thomases who explained it away as pure coincidence. "The *Gazette* can't keep hitting it right indefinitely. Time will prove that," they said.

Eventually, people in neighboring communities grew curious over the phenomenon and soon it became the chief topic of conversation for miles around. Rumors of the miracle even spread to nearby cities and one day a reporter from a large paper came to Finleyville to investigate. Soon others followed.

Mr. Lewis tried frantically to hush the whole matter up, and for good reason. He naturally feared that Ogden Birdley might turn into a national figure and refuse to continue working at a salary barely large enough to support one man and his ants.

Reporters hung around his office and hounded him with questions from morning until night: "Come on, give us the dope." "Why not let the world in on the secret?"

"I'm not talking," was all Mr. Lewis would say. But the longer he remained tight-lipped, the more reporters flocked to Finleyville, each determined to be the first to crack the story.

Among these hopefuls was a cub reporter just out of college. A comely brunette of twenty-three, Jean Nash had talked the editor of the *Scranton Herald* into giving her a trial job, and had chosen this occasion to prove her worth. Fate ordained that she inquire about a room at the same farm house where Ogden was boarding.

The morning the newcomer tripped along the flagstone walk leading to the Haskels' farm house, the first object to meet her eye was a figure squatting yogi-like on the grass. Upon drawing nearer she observed it to be a young man peering intently into a large glass container filled with earth and a swarming mass of black ants.

"Could you please tell me which is the main entrance?" she ventured.

Still squinting at the contents of the glass container, Ogden replied, "This large hole is the one they generally use, but a caterpillar got stuck in it. Now they're using this other hole over here."

Dropping her bags, the girl knelt down next to Ogden. Not knowing which fascinated her more, the busy jumble of tiny objects in the dirt-filled bowl, or the serious expression on the round, pink face, her glance darted from one to the other.

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"Until they can remove the caterpillar, traffic will be in a deplorable state," said Ogden, without turning his head. "If you look through this side of the glass you can see the trouble they're having getting milk from the aphids through to the larvae." His stubby finger traced the route along the outside of the bowl. "They've just *got* to get the milk through to the babies."

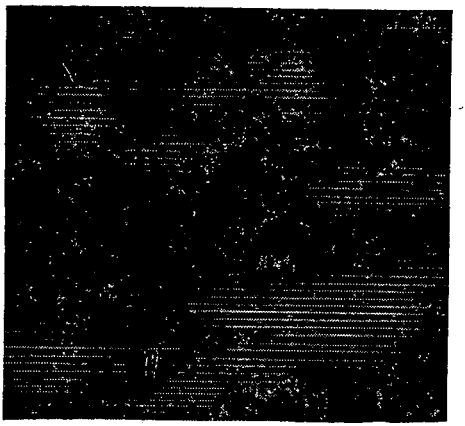
"Milk?" questioned the girl.

"Certainly. The aphids are the ant-cows. An ant milks a cow by stroking his antennae across its abdomen."

"Oh."

"You knew that ants kept their own cows, didn't you?" Ogden asked, turning for the first time to look at the face near his. He gulped perceptibly and drew back.

Some men might not have thought Jean Nash beautiful, or at least not upon first glance. Her dark curls fell with pronounced irregularity about her shoulders, and a bevy of freckles, blending one into another around her nose and eyes, gave her a slightly school-girlish appearance. Most men would have required several looks to perceive the subtle femininity in the crinkles at the corners of her eyes, or in the soft dimples near her mouth. But Ogden knew at once that he had never before been this close to anything so lovely. He scrambled



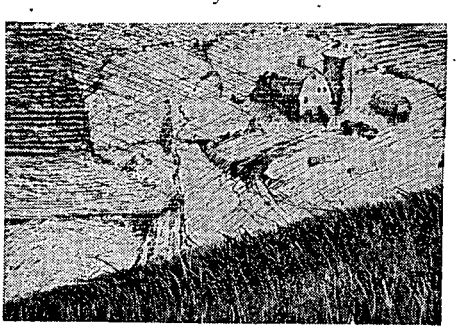
back several feet and sat blinking dubiously at her behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

"Please tell me all about how ants keep their cows," the girl said.

At that moment Ogden caught sight of the suitcases. "D-d-did you ask me which was the main entrance?" he stammered.

"I'd much rather you tell me about the cows," she answered.

"If it's a room you're interested



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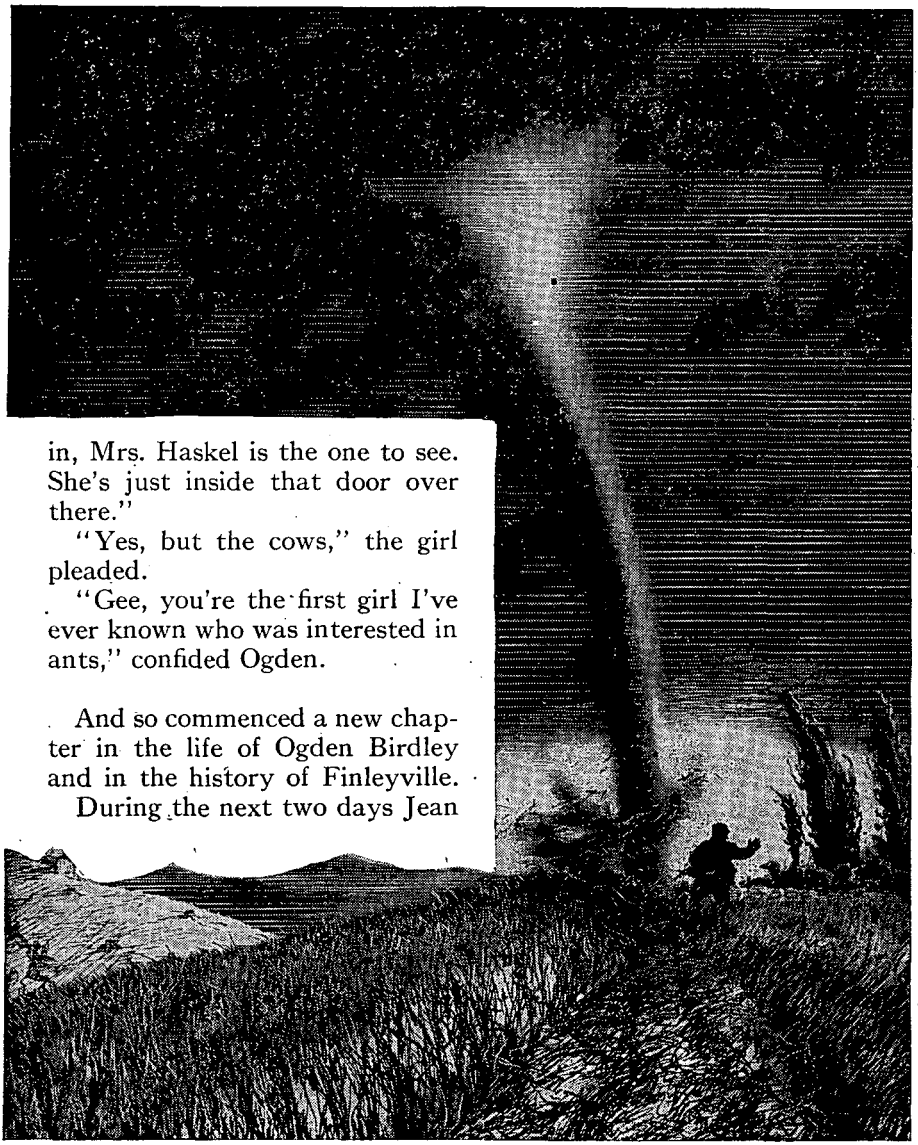

in, Mrs. Haskel is the one to see. She's just inside that door over there."

"Yes, but the cows," the girl pleaded.

"Gee, you're the first girl I've ever known who was interested in ants," confided Ogden.

And so commenced a new chapter in the life of Ogden Birdley and in the history of Finleyville.

During the next two days Jean

Illustrator: Gaylord Welker

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Nash had little time to learn about ant life. She arose early, went downtown and remained until late in the evenings. Mixing with the crowds that, of late, jammed every street corner and tavern, she sought tirelessly for a chance word or clue that might point the way to solving the mystery of the weather reports. On the afternoon of the third day she returned to the house, tired, discouraged, and as far from accomplishing her mission as on the day she arrived in Finleyville. She found Ogden feeding graham crackers to his ants and jotting down notes in a little book.

Sitting down on the grass next to him, she noticed that he, too, was depressed. "Aren't things going well with you?" she asked.

"It's the ants," he replied, heaving a deep sigh. "I'm beginning to lose faith."

"In ants?" Jean asked sympathetically.

"In human beings," he answered.

"What's the connection?" she asked.

"I've never told anyone *why* I'm studying ant life," he said. "People wouldn't understand."

"I think I might," she said gently.

He sensed an unfathomable sincerity in her voice. "Yes, I think perhaps you might." He hesitated a moment. "You see, I've been trying to find a solution to our own crumbling world by experimenting with ant society. I have a theory. For years I've been conditioning this container of black ants and another container of red ants to two completely different ways of life. Today I performed my big experiment. I mixed a few from each container."

"And what happened?"

The tragedy of all humanity was in Ogden's eyes. "They fought like savages! Something must be wrong with my theory."

"I'm terribly sorry," said Jean.

"But I'm not giving up," said Ogden. "I'm going to continue from a new angle."

"I think it's wonderful that a person can take the world's problems so to heart," said Jean admiringly.

"It doesn't seem quite so bad when we talk about it together this way. No, it doesn't seem nearly so bad." Ogden sounded almost cheerful. "Maybe it won't be a rainy week after all."

"Beg pardon?" said Jean.

"You know, it's just as though I were talking to my mother, only very much different," said Ogden, and a dreamy softness stole across his face. For a moment their eyes met. Neither spoke. Their hands lay near together in the soft grass and, holding a dandelion by the stem, Jean brushed the yellow flower across the back of

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Ogden's wrist. His hand moved toward hers, but then it stopped abruptly.

He sat upright on the grass and said suddenly, "Oh yes, the rain. I never told you; I predict the weather."

Jean's head gave a quick little jerk backward and her mouth dropped open in an expression of blank dismay.

"Not only do I predict the weather, but I *cause* it," added Ogden in a matter-of-fact tone. "You see, I happen to be an electromagnetic focal point for atmospheric condensation. When I become depressed my condition causes it to rain; when I become happy it clears up. I guess it will only rain for a day or two this time, thanks to you."

"Ogden," commenced Jean, when she had regained her equilibrium, "I've believed every word you've ever told me about the ants and their cows and all the other things. If I ever found out that you were just teasing me; that you didn't really mean these things, why I'd — I'd lose faith in everything."

Ogden looked at her a long moment. Finally he said, "I thought you'd be the one person in the world who'd believe me."

"I hoped you'd say something like that," Jean said. "Of course I believe you. That is, I believe your sincerity."

"Only my sincerity?" asked Ogden.

"I believe it might be possible for a very sensitive person to react to the weather before it actually occurs, but —"

"I guess the other is too much even for you to believe," interruped Ogden.

"So you are the one who forecasts the weather for the *Gazette*," marveled Jean.

"I suppose it's all right for you to know," Ogden answered. "That's how I earn my living. Mr. Lewis pays me fourteen dollars a week."

Jean looked thoughtful. "Fourteen dollars a week isn't very much for a man to earn these days. No wonder Mr. Lewis wants this kept a secret; he knows that if more people found out about you, you'd be offered a job at a much higher salary. Why, I think this is terrible."

"I don't really need more money." Ogden replied. "I'm quite a small eater, and the ants don't eat very much."

"But there are other things," said Jean. "For example, a man can't support a wife on fourteen dollars a week, can he?"

"I have no wife," protested Ogden, alarmed by the thought.

"But you might some day," said Jean. "Suppose you met a nice girl and fell in love with her; and suppose she fell in love with you."

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"I guess that sort of thing just doesn't happen to somebody like me," Ogden answered with a faraway look. "Besides, I've got the future of mankind to worry about. One's personal happiness can't ever possibly come before that."

"You might combine the two," suggested Jean. "Sometimes a girl can be a great help to a man if she really loves him."

"No, I might as well resign myself," said Ogden. "I'm just not the Clark Gable type."

"You have other things," said Jean.

"I guess the only thing I've got, that Clark Gable hasn't got, is ants," replied Ogden. "What girl would go for ants? None of them."

"I think ants are the most thrilling thing in the world when I listen to you tell about them," said Jean.

"A girl looks for other things in a man," said Ogden.

"All I can say is that every girl looks for something different in a man, and you'd better start thinking about your future. Now, as I was saying, if lots of people found out about you, you might be offered a much better salary, and —"

"But," interrupted Ogden, "Mr. Lewis doesn't want it known. I've never told anyone about it."

"Is it only because Mr. Lewis doesn't want it known that you've never told anyone?" she asked.

"Yes," Ogden answered. "We've both been very happy over the arrangement." He lifted the cover from the glass container and scattered a handful of crumbs to the eager occupants.

"Mr. Lewis is making a pretty fat profit on his paper these days," said Jean, lifting herself up from the grass. She stretched herself lazily and walked toward the house. "I hear he has a wife and three children, too," she added casually, and disappeared through the door.

The following morning the *Scranton Herald* carried a front-page story explaining the mystery of the *Finleyville Gazette* weather reports. In part it read:

> Scientists have long suspected that changes in human emotions are linked to variations in atmospheric pressure.
>
> At last we have a clear-cut case of a human barometer to prove the theory. This pink-faced youth of serious mien attributes the changes in local weather conditions to changes in his own state of mind. Obviously the reverse is true. He is able to predict the weather by his emotional fluctuations.
>
> His quaint belief that his mental state causes the weather is the outgrowth of an intensely ingrown neuroticism. However, it is this very neuroticism, developed to a

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hypersensitive degree, that accounts for his subtle reactions to the slightest changes in atmospheric conditions. It is without question these supersensitive responses that enable him to forecast local weather conditions with such unerring accuracy.

Ogden Birdley was still asleep when the mob surrounded the house. He had slept fitfully during the night and had lain awake many hours trying not to think the thoughts that crowded his mind. He had paced the room feverishly, trying to forget the sound of Jean's voice and the expression in her eyes as she sat near him on the grass watching him study his ants. He knew that he shouldn't allow his imagination to run rampant, but then, what had she meant when she said, "Every girl looks for something different in a man." He had fallen into a troubled sleep only after it had become light, and now, at nine o'clock, he was still deep in heavy slumber.

The sound of Mrs. Haskel pounding on his door added to the din of the crowd beneath his window and finally awakened him.

"Here, read this," Mrs. Haskel shouted to him, and tossed an opened copy of the *Scranton Herald* onto his bed. "I'll try to keep them out of the house until you get dressed."

Ogden sat up in bed, rubbed his eyes and adjusted his glasses. He stared at the article and then his eyes fell on the words, "Jean Nash, feature writer for the *Scranton Herald.*" For a moment he was stunned. Why had she not told him she was a reporter? She had gained his confidence and then betrayed him. Yes, but she had also said, "If lots of people find out about you, you might be offered a higher salary. You can't support a wife on fourteen dollars a week. You've got to start thinking about your future." Suddenly, the whole matter assumed a different complexion.

He leapt from his bed, plummeted into his trousers and dashed down the hall to Jean's room. This very moment he would ask her to marry him. The door was open, but there was no sign of Jean or her bags. Lying on the bureau was a note which read:

Ogden:

In case you are interested, I can be reached at the Scranton Herald. Best wishes for your future. *Jean*

Hurtling down the stairs, he reached for the telephone in the hall, but at that very instant the front door burst open and he was thrust back by a babbling mob of reporters, photographers, policemen, women, children and dogs. A hundred voices hurled a hundred questions at him simultaneously as he stood crowded against

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the stairway. Representatives from leading magazines fought to sign him for an exclusive story. A prominent psychiatrist argued to be the first to examine the human enigma. While dozens of others with outstretched hands whooped and shouted for his autograph, reporters from every paper in the state continued to swell the crowd. Many of the reporters had been following the story only half-heartedly and with skepticism. Now they were on hand to see for themselves.

Outside it was drizzling and cold, as Ogden's forecast in the previous day's *Gazette* had predicted it would be. But for nearly a week now, Ogden's predictions had agreed, to the letter, with the official reports. Since both had turned out to be correct, the reporters were anything but convinced of Ogden's infallible abilities. Every hotel and rooming house for miles around was packed to capacity with outsiders eagerly waiting to be able to say, "I told you so."

But through all the tumult, Ogden Birdley was aware of only one thing: he was in love. The vertebrae at the back of his neck would suddenly turn to hot embers, and a feeling of elation would sweep through him. A moment later a cold chill would shoot the length of his spine and he would be seized by a fit of depression.

Late in the day he managed to battle his way through the mob to the telephone, and to hold on tenaciously. But his efforts to reach Jean at the *Scranton Herald* were thwarted again and again. All long-distance wires were thrown into a state of hopeless confusion by the sudden avalanche of calls to and from the town. The Haskel's home kept ringing with the insistence of a burglar alarm, until finally in desperation Ogden answered, hoping against hope that it might be Jean.

The voice on the other end grated through to Ogden's ear. "Well, you've gone and done it. But dammit, you can't let me down now."

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Lewis." Ogden felt a sharp stab of disappointment.

"I've been holding up the edition for the weather forecast. For God's sake, let's have it."

Ogden tried to pull himself together, but bleak despair gripped his entire being.

"What are you waiting for?" shouted the voice over the phone.

Gloomily, Ogden answered. "Rain and cold tonight and tomorrow, with . . ." He hesitated. Again he felt a strange fire spread through his body and down his limbs. Like an infrared lamp he began to glow, until his whole countenance beamed with an inner light. "Fair and much warmer

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tomorrow," he exclaimed jubilantly. But again he hesitated. "I think you'd better hang on a minute."

"For God's sake, which is it?" roared back the editor.

"Put down fair and warmer — no, wait —"

But at that moment the phone was knocked from Ogden's hand by someone in the crowd. Mr. Lewis hung up.

Neither Finleyville nor its swarming throng of visitors had ever before experienced such weather as took place during the next twenty-four hours. One moment brilliant sunshine and soft breezes brightened the air. A moment later ominous clouds and driving rain darkened the streets, sending the multitude scurrying for shelter. Even a brief snow flurry added its bit to the hodge-podge. The *Gazette* had made an all-out effort to fill the demand for extra copies. In large blue print the weather forecast had read: FAIR AND WARMER.

The following day found Finleyville as quiet a town as any in Washington County. Only a handful of stragglers remained to catch the late train out. For a day or two after that every paper in the country gave its readers a good laugh over the story — every paper, that is, but the *Scranton Herald* and the *Finleyville Gazette.*

Ogden Birdley sat alone in his room listening to the doleful rhythm of the rain against the windows. Then, for the fifth time that morning, he phoned the *Scranton Herald.* "Yes, I understand she's been fired; so have I. But didn't she even leave a forwarding address?"

"Sorry," the answer came back.

Ogden might have been able to bear up under the personal tragedy of losing the girl he loved, and the conviction that she could never forgive him for ruining her career. But he suffered a much greater tragedy — one which affected the future of all mankind. During the turmoil of the big day, careless reporters had knocked ajar the lids to the ant containers. The result: most of the ants escaped and were trampled to death — ants which, over a period of years, he had conditioned for experimental purposes to solve the problems of the world.

Maybe it was all a part of a greater scheme, he thought to himself, as he sat in his room, drearily listening to the rain. He wondered if, perhaps, his own existence were as insignificant as an ant's, and if he mightn't as well end it all. Yes, that was the answer. Furthermore, it was the only answer, for he suddenly realized that, in his state of mind, he would bring continual rain to any community in which he remained alive. Yes, he definitely should end it all.

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But at that moment his glance fell upon an unopened newspaper lying by the door of his room. He could only see the headlines, but that was enough.

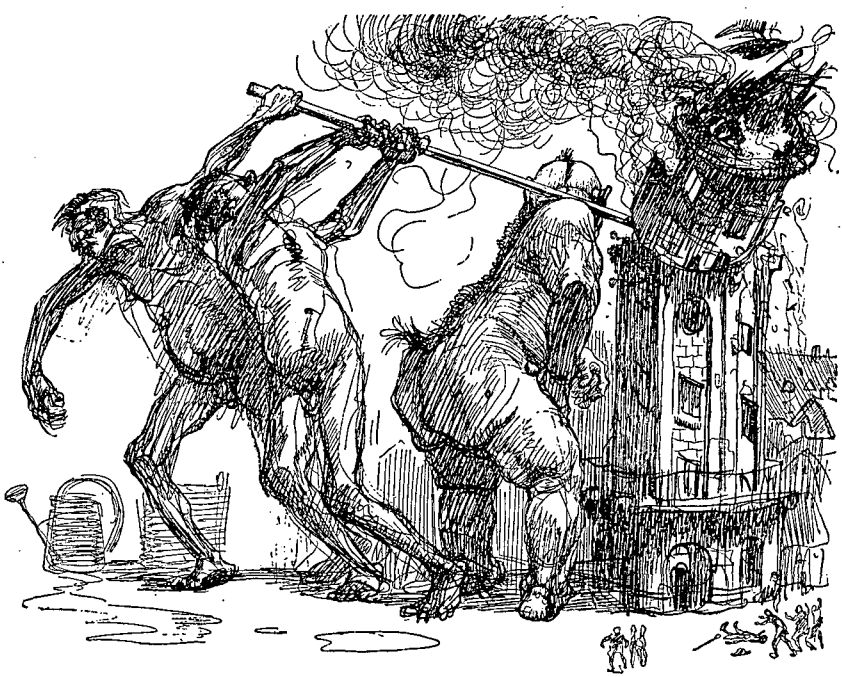
WORLD FOOD CRISIS LOOMS
WITH DROUGHT IN CORN BELT

Well, he would perform one last service to mankind.

"How long will you need rain?" Ogden asked a couple of farmers as he stepped off the train at Carson, Iowa, in the heart of the corn belt.

"At least ten days," one answered, and then, recognizing Ogden from recent pictures in the paper, nudged the other, whereupon they both turned quickly to hide their mirth.

But soon Ogden had the satisfaction of knowing that his life was not completely in vain. The next day it poured cauldrons. The state farm bureaus were jubilant. Of course, the farmers tossed it off as coincidence, and laughed themselves sick over the comical little screw-ball with the short-cropped



The Reformers Drawing: Heinrich Kley

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red hair and the thick glasses.

On the third day of rain old Phil Dudley, the postmaster, stopped sorting mail to examine an envelope forwarded from Finleyville, Pennsylvania, to Ogden Birdley, General Delivery, Carson, Iowa. He put the envelope aside and appeared unusually thoughtful for the remainder of the day.

That night he called together a number of Carson's leading citizens. They all agreed that the envelope was addressed in a woman's handwriting. Furthermore, it carried with it a slight aroma of perfume. Of course, it might only be from his mother, but then again, it might not.

One thing was clear to all of them: no man could possibly be as depressed as Ogden Birdley unless a woman were involved. Now, could it be possible that this letter might be of such a nature as to completely alter the receiver's state of mind? This was the question foremost in everyone's thoughts that night. Of course, it would be preposterous to suppose for a moment that this eccentric little stranger actually had anything to do with causing the rain, but then, why tempt fate?

Some were all for burning the letter then and there, but others objected to such high-handed methods. A heated debate followed which finally ended in a compromise. All agreed that no harm could result from withholding the letter from Ogden until after the tenth day of rain.

The days that followed were joyous ones for many thousands of farmers. To the entire world they brought new life and hope. To Ogden Birdley each successive day carried him nearer and nearer to his doom.

Late on the tenth day the skies darkened to a terrifying hue. Low black clouds, nearly touching the tops of the corn, emptied themselves in torrents over the countryside.

Postmaster Dudley stood looking through the Post Office window at the darkening landscape. "A depressing sight, even to a farmer," he mused as the sheets of rain beat a dirge on the window pane. A quizzical expression passed over his wrinkled face. He ambled back to his desk, sat down and opened the lowest drawer. Yes, the letter was still there. He picked up the phone and called Sam Hobbs, at whose place Ogden Birdley was boarding. "Hello, Sam? D'ya ever see such rain in all your life? Actually getting to be depressing. Just remembered it's time we gave that youngster his letter. Think you'd better tell him about it right away."

"Had the same thought myself," came back Sam's voice. "Trouble is, haven't seen him all day."

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When Postmaster Dudley hung up, there was a worried look on his face. He made several more calls, but no one had seen Ogden. Finally he tried Jim Runson at the general store.

"Yes," said Jim, "he dropped in a couple of hours ago. Bought a sheaf of hemp rope, and then left."

"You don't mean you actually let him have it?" gasped the Postmaster.

The good citizens of Carson wasted little time in spreading the alarm. The same ones who had burst their buttons laughing at the queer little stranger, only the day before, were now congregated in groups of solemn-faced men scouring the drenched countryside.

Ogden Birdley's life had been a remarkable series of frustrations, even up to the crucial moments of that last fateful day.

Never having been much of an athlete, he found it impossible to climb a tree, especially in rubbers and a raincoat. He was extremely nearsighted and, to add to his difficulties, the solid downpour blurred the thick lenses of his glasses until he was nearly blind. Again and again he attempted to lasso the limb of a tree, but with no success. He was still trying when Postmaster Dudley and a group of wet and weary men came upon him near the town outskirts.

Reports vary as to exactly what occurred when Ogden opened the letter. It was from Jean Nash, and on stationery bearing an Omaha, Nebraska, address. Part of it read:

I know that you can never forgive me for disrupting your life. I ask only that you try to understand my motive. I love you and what I did I thought I was doing for your best interests. I realize now that I was wrong and that I can never hope for your forgiveness.

Some say that Ogden Birdley leapt into the air and then commenced to run. Others remember only that he leapt into the air. All agree that he disappeared with incredible speed.

The following day the newspapers described a freak tornado that ripped across the edge of the state in an almost straight line from Carson toward the Nebraska border. Fortunately, it tore through a sparsely populated area, and caused little damage.

Although statistics prove that only one in five marriages turns out successfully nowadays, it seems significant to mention, in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Ogden Birdley, that they currently reside in the "Sunshine State" where, it is rumored, Ogden is on the Chamber of Commerce payroll. Friends of mine who live there tell me that Florida sunshine is a bit brighter this year.

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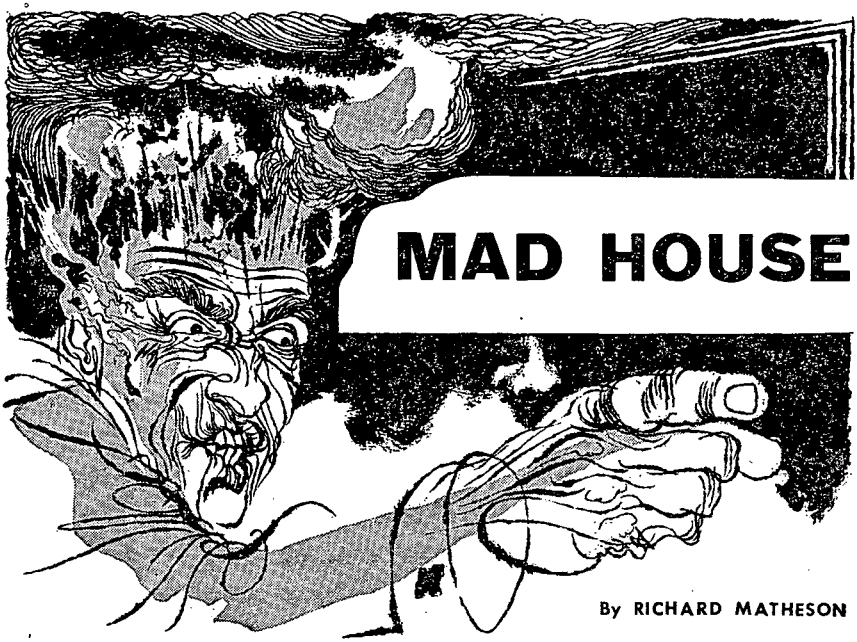

MAD HOUSE

By RICHARD MATHESON

Do petty annoyances upset you? Do you find yourself slaping the desk top when your eraser slips out of sight under loose papers? Do you give your pen a savage shake when it jams?

If so, you want to watch it, brother! Anger is acid, and it can get into more than your blood. The desk might start slapping back, the shaken pen may try spraying you with ink?

. . . We met Dick Matheson recently, for the first time. He wasn't at all what we expected — especially after reading Mad House. Our sigh of relief rattled the roof. . . .

HE sits down at his desk. He picks up a long yellow pencil and starts to write. The lead point breaks.

The ends of his lips turn down. The eye pupils grow small in the hard mask of his face. Quietly, mouth pressed into an ugly lipless gash, he picks up the pencil sharpener.

He grinds off the shavings and tosses the sharpener back in the drawer.

Once more he starts to write.

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The point snaps again and the lead rolls across the paper.

Suddenly his face becomes livid. Wild rage clamps the muscles of his body. He yells at the pencil, curses it with a long stream of outraged epithets. He breaks it in two with a brutal snap and flings it into the wastebasket.

He sits tensely on the chair, his eyes wide, his lips trembling. He shakes with a frenzied wrath. It sprays his insides with acid.

The pencil lies in the wastebasket, broken and still. It is wood, lead, metal, rubber; all dead, without appreciation of the burning fury it has caused.

And yet . . .

He is standing quietly by the window, peering out at the street. He is letting the tightness sough away.

He does not hear the rustle in the wastebasket which ceases almost immediately it has begun.

He sits down before his typewriter.

He inserts a sheet of paper and begins tapping on the keys.

His fingers are large. He hits two keys at once. The two type surfaces are jammed together. They stand in the air, hovering impotently over the black ribbon. He reaches over in disgust and slaps them back and starts typing again. He hits the keys brutally, fingers falling like the stiff claws of a derrick. He types faster. Four of the keys stick together.

He screams.

He slams his fist on the machine. He clutches at the paper and rips it from the machine in ragged pieces. He welds the fragments in his fist and hurls the crumpled ball across the room. He beats the carriage over and slams the cover down on the machine.

He jumps up. "You fool!" he shouts at the machine, in a bitter revolted voice. "You stupid, idiotic, asinine fool!"

He quivers as he yells. And he wonders, deep in the self-isolated recesses of his mind, whether he is killing himself with anger, whether he is destroying his system with fury.

He turns and stalks away. He is too outraged to hear the slight whirring of metal, somewhat as if the keys were trembling in their slots.

He is shaving. The razor will not cut. Or the razor is too sharp and cuts too much. Both times a muffled curse billows up through his lips. He hurls the razor on the floor and kicks it against the wall.

He is cleaning his teeth. He draws the fine silk floss between his teeth. It shreds off. A fuzzy bit remains in the gap. He tries to press another piece down to get that bit out. He cannot force the white thread down. It snaps in his fingers.

He screams. He screams at the

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man in the mirror and draws back his hand, throws the floss away violently.

He has torn another piece of floss from the container. He is giving the dental floss another chance. He is holding back his fury. If the floss knows what is good for it, it will plunge down between the teeth and draw out the shredded bit immediately.

It does.

The man is mollified. But the anger is still there, a thing apart.

He is eating. His wife places a steak before him. He picks up the knife and fork. He slices. The meat is tough, or the blade is dull.

A spot of red puffs up in his cheeks. His eyes narrow. He draws the knife through the meat. The blade will not sever the browned flesh. The meat will not surrender.

White teeth jam together. The knife is hurled across the room in a paroxysm of violent temper.

So through the days and nights.

His anger falling like frenzied axe blows on every article in his house, everything he owns.

Sprays of teeth-grinding hysteria clouding his windows and falling to his floors. Oceans of wild uncontrolled hate flooding through every room of his house; filling each iota of space with a shifting, throbbing life.

He lay on his back and stared hard at the sun-mottled ceiling.

The last day. The phrase had been creeping in and out of his brain since he had awakened.

In the bathroom he could hear the water running. He could hear the medicine cabinet being opened and then closed again. He could hear the sound of her slippers shuffling on the tile floor.

Sally, he thought, don't leave me. Please. "I'll take it easy if you stay," he promised the air in a whisper.

But he knew he couldn't take it easy. That was too hard. It was easier to fly off the handle. Easier to scream and rant and attack.

He turned on his side and stared out into the hall at the bathroom door. He could see the line of light under the door. Sally is in there, he thought. Sally, my wife, whom I married many years ago when I was young and full of hope.

He closed his eyes suddenly and clenched his fists. It came upon him again. The sickness that prevailed with more violence every time he contracted it. The sickness of despair, of lost ambition. It ruined everything. It cast a vapor of bitterness over all his comings and goings. It jaded appetite, ruined sleep, destroyed affection.

He gritted his teeth and tried to make his mind a blank. Like a dull-eyed idiot, his mind repeated the words that he muttered often in his sleep through restless tossing nights: I'm 35 years old. I

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teach English at Fort College. Once I had hoped to be a writer. I thought this would be a fine place to write. I would teach class part of the day and write with the rest of my time. I met Sally at school and married her. I thought everything would be just fine. I thought success was inevitable.

Fifteen years ago.

Fifteen years.

How, he thought, could you mark the passing of a decade and a half? The time seemed a shapeless lump of failing efforts, of anguished nights; of the secret, the answer, the revelation always being withheld from him. Dangled overhead like cheese swinging in a maddening arc over the narrow head of a beserk rat.

And resentment building higher and higher. Mostly now it was directed at Sally. Every penny she spent on the house was like a blow at his aspirations, took him that much farther from the time he could devote himself solely to writing.

He forced himself to think that way. He forced himself to believe that it was only time he needed to do great writing. But once a furious student had yelled at him: "You're just a third-rate talent hiding behind a desk!"

He remembered that.

Oh God, how he remembered that moment. Remembered the cold sickness that had convulsed him when those words hit his brain. Recalled the trembling and the shaky unreason of his voice.

He had failed the student for the semester, despite good marks. There had been a great to-do about it. The student's father had come to the school. They had all gone before Dr. Ramsay, the head of the English department.

He remembered that too. The scene could crowd out all other memories: him, sitting on one side of the conference table facing the irate father and son. Dr. Ramsay stroking his beard until he thought he'd hurl something at him. Dr. Ramsay had said, "Well, let's see if we can't straighten this little matter out."

They had consulted the record book and found that the student was right. Dr. Ramsay had looked up at him in great surprise. "Well, I can't see what . . ." he had said, and then let his syrupy voice trail off, just waiting for an explanation.

And the explanation had been hopeless. A jumbled and pointless affair. Irresponsible attitude, he had said. Flaunting of unpardonable behavior. Morally a failure.

And Dr. Ramsay, his thick neck getting red, telling him in no uncertain terms that morals were not subject to the grading system at Fort College.

There was more, but he'd forgotten it. He'd made an effort to forget it.

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But he couldn't forget that it would be years before he made a professorship. Ramsay would hold it back. And his salary would go on being insufficient and bills would mount and he would never get his writing done.

He regained the present to find himself clutching the sheets with taut fingers. He found himself glaring in hate at the bathroom door. His mind snapped vindictively. Go on! Go home to your precious mother. See if I care. Why just a trial separation? Make it permanent. Give me some peace. Maybe I can do some writing then.

Maybe I can do some writing then.

The phrase made him sick. It had no meaning any more. Like a word that is repeated until it becomes gibberish, that sentence, for him, had been used to extinction.

For a moment, though, he wondered if it were true. Now that she was leaving, could he forget about her and really get some work done? Quit his job? Go somewhere and hole up in a cheap furnished room and write?

And far back in his mind he wondered if he could write anywhere. Often the question threw itself at him when he was least expecting it. You have four hours every morning, the statement would rise like a menacing wraith. You have time to write many thousands of words. Why don't you?

The bathroom door opened and she came out dressed in her good red suit. For no reason at all, it seemed, he suddenly realized that she'd been wearing that same outfit for more than three years.

The realization angered him even more. He closed his eyes and hoped she wasn't looking at him. I hate her, he thought. I hate her because she has destroyed my life.

He heard the rustle of her skirt as she sat at the dressing table and pulled out a drawer.

He kept his eyes shut. He listened to the Venetian blinds tap lightly against the window frame as morning breezes touched them. He could smell her perfume floating lightly on the air.

And he tried to think of the house empty all the time.

He tried to think of coming home from class and not finding Sally there waiting for him. The idea seemed, somehow, impossible.

And that angered him.

Yes, he thought, she's gotten to me. She's worked on me until I am so dependent on her for really unessential things that I suffer under the delusion that I cannot do without her.

He turned suddenly and looked at her. "So you're really going," he said in a cold voice.

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There was no anger on her face. She looked tired. "Yes." she said, "I'm going."

Good riddance. The words tried to pass his lips. He cut them off. "I suppose you have your reasons," he said bitterly.

Her shoulders twitched a moment in what he took for a shrug of weary amusement.

"I have no intentions of arguing with you," he said. "Your life is your own."

She was quiet, saying nothing, just looking tired.

She's waiting for apologies, he thought. Waiting to be told that he didn't hate her as he'd said. That he'd not struck her, but all his twisted and shattered hopes; the mocking spectacle of his own lost faith.

"And just how long is this *trial* separation going to last?" he said, his voice acidulous.

She shook her head. "I don't know, Chris," she said quietly, "It's up to you."

"Up to me?" he said. "It's always up to me, isn't it?"

"Oh *please*, Chris. I don't want to argue any more. I'm too tired to argue."

"It's easier to just pack and run away."

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes were very dark and unhappy. "Run away?" she said, "After fifteen years you accuse me of that? Fifteen years of watching you destroy yourself. And me along with you. Oh, don't look surprised. I'm sure you know that you've driven me half insane too."

She turned away and he saw her shoulders twitch. She brushed some tears away from her eyes.

"It's n-not just because you hit me," she said. "You kept saying that last night when I said I was leaving.

"Do you think it would matter if . . ." She took a deep breath. "If it meant you were angry with *me?* If it was that I could be hit every day. But you didn't hit *me.* I'm nothing to you. I'm not wanted."

"Oh, stop being so —"

"No," she broke in. "That's why I'm going. Because I can't bear to watch you hate me more every day for something that — that isn't my fault."

"I suppose you —"

"Oh, don't say any more," she cried, getting up. She hurried out of the room.

Don't say any more? his mind asked as though she were still there. Well, there's more to say. Lots more.

You don't seem to realize what I've lost, he told her. You don't seem to understand. I had hopes. Oh, God, what hopes I had. I was going to write prose to make the people sit up and gasp. I was going to tell them things they need badly to know. I was going to tell them in so entertaining a way that

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they would never realize that the truth was getting to them. I was going to create immortal works.

Now when I die I shall only be dead. I am trapped in this depressing village. Entombed in a college of science where men gape at dust and do not even know that there are stars above their heads. I don't know what to do. . . .

He looked miserably at her perfume bottles. At the powder box that tinkled *Always* when the cover was lifted off.

I'll remember you. Always.
With a heart's that true. Always.

The words are childish and comical, he thought. But his throat contracted and he felt himself shudder. "Sally," he said. So quietly that he could hardly hear it himself.

After a while he got up and dressed. While he was putting on his trousers a rug slid from under him and he had to grab the dresser for support. He glared down, heart pounding in the total fury he had learned to summon within the space of seconds.

"Damn you," he muttered.

He forgot Sally. He forgot everything. He just wanted to get even with the rug. He kicked it violently under the bed. The anger plunged down and disappeared. He shook his head. I'm sick, he thought. He thought of going in to her and telling her that he was sick, that he needed help.

His mouth tightened as he went into the bathroom.

No, I'm not sick, he contradicted. Not in body, anyway. It's my mind that's ill. And she only makes it worse.

The bathroom was still damply warm from her use of it. He opened the window a trifle and got a splinter in his finger.

"Damn you!" he snarled loudly at the finger. He picked at the flesh until he had pulled out the sliver of wood.

He jerked at the cabinet door. It stuck. His face reddened. He pulled harder and the door flew open and cracked him on the wrist. He spun about and grabbed his wrist. He threw back his head with a whining gasp.

He stood there, eyes clouded with pain, staring at the ceiling. He looked at the crack that ran in a crazy meandering line across the ceiling width and into the wall to disappear where the line of tile began.

Then he closed his eyes. And began to sense something. Intangible. A sense of menace. He wondered about it. Why, it's myself, of course, he reasoned. It is the moral decrepitude of my own subconscious. It is bawling out to me, saying: You are to be punished for driving your poor wife away to her mother's arms. You are not a man. You are a —

"Oh shut up," he said out loud.

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He washed his hands and face. He ran an inspecting finger over his chin. He needed a shave. He opened the cabinet door gingerly and took out his straight razor. He held it up and looked at it.

The handle was expanded.

He told himself that quickly as the blade appeared to fall out of the handle willfully. It made him shiver to see it flop out like that and glitter in the light from the cabinet light fixture.

He stared in repelled fascination at the bright steel. He touched the blade edge. So sharp, he thought. The slightest push will sever flesh. What a hideous thing it is.

"*It's my hand.*"

He said it involuntarily and shut the razor suddenly.

It *was* his hand. It had to be. It couldn't have been that the razor moved by itself. That was sick imagination. But he didn't shave. He put the razor back in the cabinet with a vague sense of forestalling doom.

Don't care if we are expected to shave every day, he said. I'm not taking a chance on my hand's slipping. I'd better get a safety razor, anyway. This kind isn't for me. I'm too nervous.

Suddenly a picture of himself fifteen years before flew into his brain. He remembered a date he'd had with Sally. He remembered telling her he was so calm it was akin to being dead. Nothing bothers me, he'd said. And it was true. At the time.

He remembered, too, telling her he didn't like coffee. That one cup kept him awake all night. That he didn't smoke. Didn't like the taste or the smell. I like to stay healthy. That's what he'd said. He remembered the exact words.

"And now," he muttered at his lean and worn reflection. Now he drank gallons of coffee a day. Until it sloshed like a black pool in his stomach and he couldn't sleep any more than he could fly. Now he smoked endless strings of finger-yellowing cigarettes until his throat felt raw and clogged.

As he brushed his teeth, he tried to recall when this irrational temper had first begun to control him. But there was no way of tracing its course. Somewhere in mists that could not be pierced, it had started. With a word of petulance. An angry contraction of muscles. With a glare of unrecallable animosity.

And from there, like a swelling amoeba, it had gone its own perverted and downward course of evolution, reaching its present nadir in him; a taut, embittered man who found his only solace in hating.

He spit out white froth and rinsed his mouth.

As he put down the glass, it cracked. A barb of glass drove into his hand.

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"Damn!" he yelled.

He spun on his heel and clenched his fist. It sprang open as the sliver sank into his palm.

He stood with tears on his cheeks, breathing heavily. He thought of Sally listening to him, hearing once more the audible evidence of his snapping nerves.

Stop it! he told himself. You can never do anything until you rid yourself of this de-enervating temper. He drew the glass sliver from his palm. He put on his dark tie.

Then he went into the dining room, consulting his watch. It was ten-thirty already. More than half the morning was gone. It happened that way more often now than he would admit even to himself. Sleeping late. Making up errands. Doing anything to forestall the terrible moment when he must sit down before his typewriter and try to wrench some harvest from the growing desert of his mind.

It was harder every time. And he grew more angry every time. And hated more. And had never noticed until now, when it was too late, that Sally had grown desperate and could no longer stand his temper or his hate.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down across the table from where she was drinking coffee. She started to get up.

"What's the matter? Can't you stand the sight of me?"

She sat back and took a deep pull on the cigarette in her hand. Then she tamped it out on the saucer.

He felt sick. He wanted to get out of the house suddenly. It felt alien to him. He had the feeling that she had renounced all claim to it. That she had retreated from it. The touch of her fingers and the loving indulgences she had bestowed on every room — all these things were taken back. They had lost tangibility because she was leaving. She was deserting it and it was not their home any more. This he felt strongly.

Sinking back against the chair, he pushed away his cup and stared at the yellow oilcloth on the table. He felt as if he and Sally were frozen in time. That seconds were drawn out like some fantastic taffy, until each one seemed an eternity. The clock ticked slower. And the house became a different house.

"What train are you getting?" he asked, knowing before he spoke that there was only one morning train.

"12:47," she said.

When she said it, he felt as if his stomach were pulled back hard against his backbone. He gasped, so actual was the physical pain. She glanced at him.

"Burned myself," he said hastily, and she got up and put her cup and saucer in the sink.

Why did I say that? he thought.

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Why couldn't I say that I gasped because I was filled with terror at the thought of her leaving me? Why do I always say the things I don't mean? I'm not bad. But every time I speak, I build the walls of hate and bitterness around me higher and higher, until I cannot escape them.

Sally walked out of the kitchen. He sat tensely at the table, rage making his body tremble.

Consciously, he tried to relax, and pressed his left hand over his eyes. He sat there trying to lose his misery in silence and blackness.

It wouldn't work.

And then his cigarette really burned him and he sat erect. The cigarette hit the floor, scattering ashes. He bent over and picked it up. He threw it at the waste can and missed. To hell with it, he thought.

He got up and dumped the cup and saucer in the sink. The saucer broke in half and nicked his right thumb. He let it bleed.

She was in the extra room finishing her packing.

The extra room. The words tortured him now. When had they stopped calling it "the nursery"? When had they learned they would never be able to have the children they wanted so badly? When had he begun to replace this loss with nothing better than volcanic temper and days and nights of sheath-scraped nerves?

He stood in the doorway and watched her. He wanted to get out his typewriter and sit down. He wanted to write reams of words. He wanted to glory in his coming freedom. Think of all the money he could save. Think of how soon he could go away and write all the things he'd always meant to write.

He stood in the doorway. Sick.

Is this possible? his mind asked, incredulous. Possible that she is leaving? But she and he were man and wife. They had lived and loved in this house for fifteen years.

Now she was leaving. Putting articles of clothing in her old black suitcase and leaving. He couldn't reconcile himself to that. He couldn't understand it or ally it with the functions of the day. Where did it fit into the pattern? The pattern that was Sally right there cleaning and cooking and trying to make their home happy and warm.

He shivered and, turning abruptly, went back into the bedroom. He slumped down on the bed and stared at the delicately whirring electric clock on their bedside table.

Past eleven. In less than an hour I have to hold class for a group of idiot freshmen. And on the desk in the living room is a mountain of mid-term examinations with essays that I must suffer through, feeling my stomach turn at their paucity of intelli-

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gence, their adolescent phraseology.

And all that tripe, all those miles of hideous prose, have been wound into an eternal skein in my head. And there it sits unraveling into my own writing until I wonder if I can stand the thought of living any more. I have digested the worst. Is it any wonder then that I exude it piecemeal?

Temper began again, a low banking fire in him, gradually fanned by further thinking.

I've done no writing this morning. Like every morning after every other morning as time passes. I do less and less. I write nothing. Or I write worthless things. I could write better when I was twenty than I can now.

I will *never* write anything good!

He jolted to his feet and his head snapped around as he looked for something to strike at, something to break, something to hate with such force that it would wither under the blast.

It seemed as though the room clouded. He felt a throbbing.

His left leg banged against a corner of the bed.

He gasped in fury. He wept. Tears of hate and repentence and self-commiseration. I am lost, he thought. Lost. There is nothing.

He became very calm. Icy calm. Drained of pity. Of emotion. He put on his suit coat. He put on his hat and got his briefcase off the dresser. He stopped before the door to the room where she still fussed with her bag. He felt his heart thudding like a heavy drum beat.

"Have a nice time at your mother's," he said dispassionately.

She looked up and saw the expression on his face. She turned away and put a hand to her eyes. He felt a sudden need to run to her and beg for forgiveness. Make everything right again.

But he turned away and walked across the living room. The small rug slipped a little, and it helped to focus the strength of anger he needed. He kicked it aside.

He slammed the front door behind him.

His eyes saw that it was a beautiful day, but his mind would not attest to it. The trees were thick with green, and the air warm and fresh. Spring breezes flooded down the streets. He felt them brush over him. He walked down the block, crossed Main Street to the bus stop.

He stood on the corner looking back at the house. She is in there, his mind persisted in analysis. In there, the house in which we have lived for so many years. She is packing or crying or doing something. And soon she will call the Campus Cab Company. A cab will come. The driver will honk the horn. Sally will put on her light spring coat and take her suit-

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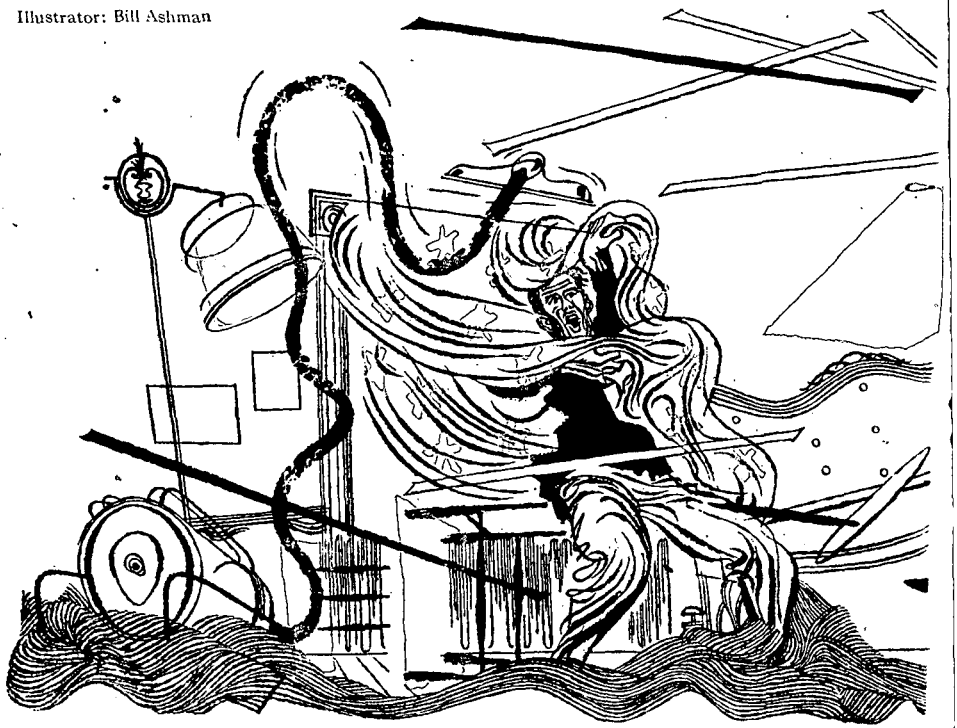
Illustrator: Bill Ashman



case out on the porch. She will lock the door behind her — maybe for the last time.

"*No.*"

He could not keep the word from strangling in his throat. He kept staring at the house. His head ached. He saw everything weaving. I'm sick, he thought.

"I'm sick!"

He shouted it. There was no one around to hear. He stood gazing at the house. She is going away forever, said his mind.

Very well then! He would write. I will write, write, write. He let the word soak into his mind and displace all else.

A man had a choice, after all. He devoted his life to his work or to his wife and home and children. It could not be combined. Not in this day and age. In this insane world where God is second to income and goodness to wealth.

He glanced aside as the green-striped bus topped the distant hill and approached. He put the briefcase under his arm and reached into his coat pocket for a token. There was a hole in the pocket.

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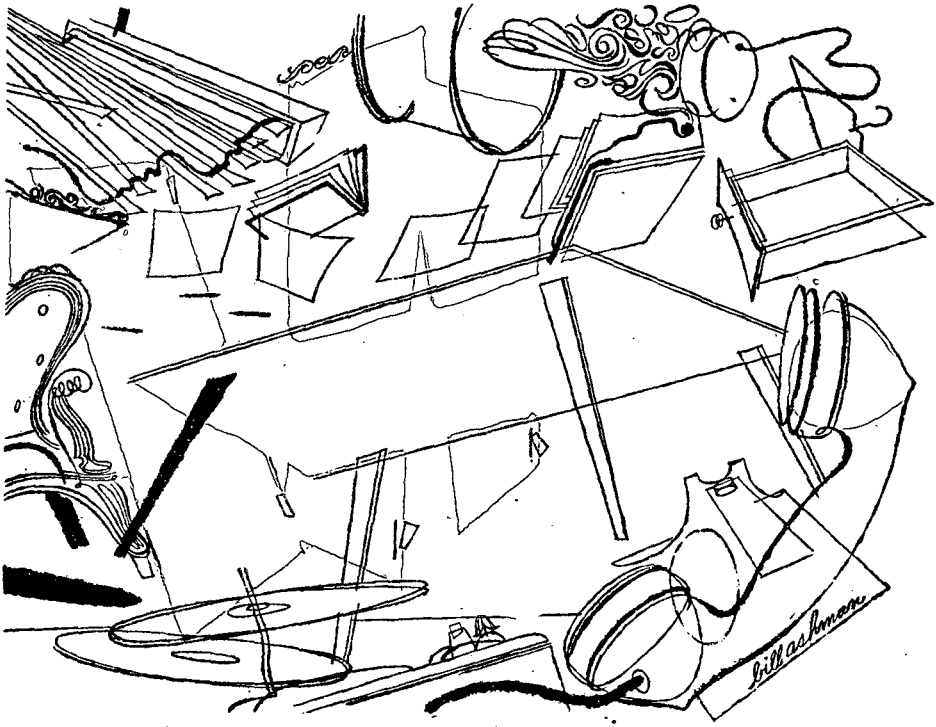

Sally had been meaning to sew it. Well, she would never sew it now. What did it matter anyway? I would rather have my soul intact than the clothes I wear.

Words, words, he thought, as the bus stopped before him. They flood through me now that she is leaving. Is that an evidence that it is her presence that clogs the channels of thought?

He dropped the token in the coin box and weaved down the length of the bus. He passed a professor he knew and nodded to him abstractedly. He slumped down on the back seat and stared at the grimy rubberized floor boards.

This is a great life, his mind ranted. I am so pleased with this, my life, and these, my great and noble accomplishments.

He opened the briefcase. He looked in at the thick prospectus he had outlined with the aid of Dr. Ramsay.

First Week: (1) *Everyman*. Discussion of. Reading of selections from *Classic Readings For College Freshmen*. (2) *Beowulf*. Reading of. Class discussion. Twenty-minute quotation quiz.

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He shoved the sheaf of papers back into the briefcase. It sickens me, he thought. I hate these things. The classics have become anathema to me. I begin to loathe the very mention of them. Chaucer, the Elizabethan poets, Dryden, Pope, Shakespeare.

What higher insult to a man than to grow to hate these names because he must share them with unappreciative clods. Because he must strain them thin and make them palatable for the dullards who should better be digging ditches.

He got off the bus downtown and started down the long slope of Ninth Street. Walking, he felt as though he were a ship with its hawser cut, prey to a twisted network of violent currents. He felt apart from the city, the country, the world. If someone told me I were a ghost, he thought, I would be inclined to believe. He plodded under the arch and into the wide green campus of the college. He looked across at the huge Physical Sciences Center, its granite face beaming in the late morning sun.

Now she must be calling the cab, he thought. He consulted his watch. No. She is in the cab already. Riding through the silent streets. Past the houses and down into the shopping district. Past the red brick buildings spewing out yokels and students. Through the town that was a potpourri of the sophisticated and the rustic.

Now the cab should be turning left and moving into Tenth Street. Now pulling up the hill. Topping it. Gliding down toward the railroad station. Now —

"Chris!"

His head snapped around and his body twitched in surprise. He looked toward the wide-doored entrance to the Mental Sciences Building. Dr. John Morton was coming out.

We attended school together fifteen years ago, he thought, John and I. But I only took a small interest in science. I preferred wasting my time on the literary culture of the centuries. I didn't care for mud and steel and bunsen burners. That's why I'm an associate and he's a doctor and head of his department.

All this fled through his brain like racing winds as Dr. Morton approached, smiling. He clapped Chris on the shoulder.

"Hello there. How are things?"

"How are they ever?"

Dr. Morton's smile faded. "What is it, Chris?" he asked.

I won't tell you about Sally, Chris thought. Not if I die first. You'll never know it from me. "The usual," he said.

"Still on the outs with Ramsay?"

Chris shrugged. Morton looked over at the large clock on the façade of the Mental Sciences Building.

"Say, look," he said, "why are

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we standing here? Your class isn't for a half hour yet, is it?"

Chris didn't answer. He's going to invite me for coffee, he thought. He's going to regale me with more of his inane theories. He's going to use me as whipping boy for his mental merry-go-round.

"Let's get some coffee," Morton said, taking Chris's arm. They walked along in silence for a few steps.

"How's Sally?" Morton asked.

"She's fine," he answered in an even voice.

"Good. Oh, incidentally, before I forget, I'll probably drop by tomorrow or the next day for that book I left there last Thursday night."

"All right."

"What were you saying about Ramsay now?"

"I wasn't."

Morton skipped it. "Been giving any thought to what I told you?" he asked.

"If you're referring to your fairy tales about my house, no. I haven't been giving them any more thought than they deserve. Which is none."

They turned the corner of the building and walked toward Ninth Street.

"Chris, that's an indefensible attitude," Morton said. "You have no right to doubt when you don't know. You have no right to an opinion on a subject you know absolutely nothing about."

Chris felt like pulling his arm away, turning and leaving Morton standing there. He was sick of words and words and words. He wanted to be alone. He almost felt as if he could put a pistol to his head now. Get it over with. Yes, I could, he thought. If someone handed it to me now, this moment, it would be done right here.

They went up the stone steps to the sidewalk and crossed over to the Campus Cafe. Morton opened the door and ushered Chris in. Chris went in back and slid into a wooden booth.

Morton brought two coffees and sat across from him. "Now, listen," he said, stirring in sugar, "I'm your best friend. At least I regard myself as such. And I'm damned if I'll sit by like a mute and watch you kill yourself. What'll it take to convince you, damnit? Do you have to lose your life first?"

"Look," Chris said pettishly, "I don't believe it. That's all. Forget it now. Let it go."

"Listen, Chris, I can show you —"

"You can show me nothing!" Chris cut in. He shook his head in disgust. "What dreams you white-frocked kiddies have in the sanctified cloister of your laboratory. You can make yourself believe anything after a while. As long as you can make up a measurement for it."

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"Will you listen to me, Chris? How many times have you complained to me about splinters, about closet doors flying open, about rugs slipping? How many times?"

"Oh, don't start that again, for God's sake. I'll get up and walk out of here. I'm in no mood for your lectures. Save them for those poor idiots who pay tuition to hear them."

Morton looked at him with a shake of his head. "I wish I could get to you," he said.

"Forget it."

"Forget it?" Morton squirmed. "Can't you see that it's impossible to forget? Can't you see that you're in danger because of your temper?"

"I'm telling you, John —"

"Where do you think that temper of yours goes? Do you think it disappears? No. It doesn't. It goes into your rooms and into your furniture and into the air. It goes into Sally. It makes everything sick. Including you. It crowds you out. It welds a link between animate and inanimate. Psychobolie. Oh, don't look so petulant. Like a child who can't stand to hear the word 'spinach'. Sit down, for God's sake. You're an adult. Listen like one."

Chris lit a cigarette. He let Morton's voice drift into a non-intelligent hum. He glanced up at the wall clock. Quarter to twelve. In two minutes, if schedule was adhered to, she would be going. The train would move and the town of Fort would pass away from her.

"I've told you any number of times," Morton was saying, "no one knows what matter is really made of. Atoms, electrons, pure energy. All words. Who knows where it ends? We guess. We make up means of measurement. We theorize. But we don't know.

"And that's for matter. Think of the human brain. Think of its still unknown capacities. It's an uncharted continent, Chris. It may stay that way for a long time. But all that time the suspected powers will still be affecting us, and maybe affecting matter. Even if we can't show it on a gauge.

"And I say you're poisoning your house. I say your temper has become ingrained in the structure. In every article you touch. All of them influenced by you and your ungovernable rages. And I think too that if it weren't for Sally's presence acting as an abortive factor, well . . . you might actually be attacked by . . ."

"Oh, stop this gibberish, for God's sake," Chris snapped angrily. "You're talking like a juvenile after he's finished reading his first Tom Swift novel."

Morton sighed. He ran his fingers over the cup edge and shook his head sadly. "Well," he said,

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"all I can do is hope that nothing breaks down. It's obvious that you're not going to listen to me."

"Congratulations on one statement I can agree with," said Chris. He looked at his watch. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go and listen to saddle-shoed cretins stumble over passages they haven't the slightest ability to assimilate."

The students were reading a selection from *King Lear*. Their heads were bent over the books.

He stared at them without seeing them. I've got to resign myself to it, he told himself. I've got to forget her, that's all. She's gone. I'm not going to bewail the fact. I'm not going to hope against hope that she'll return. I don't *want* her back. I'm better off without her. Free and unfettered now.

His thoughts drained off. He felt empty and helpless. He felt as though he could never write another word the rest of his life. Maybe, he thought, sullenly displeased with the idea, maybe it was only the upset of her leaving that enabled my brain to find words. After all, the words I thought of, the ideas that flourished, though briefly, were all to do with her. Her going and my wretchedness because of it.

He caught himself short. No! he cried in silent battle. I will not let it be that way. I'm strong. This feeling is only temporary. I'll very soon have learned to do without her. And then I'll do work. Brilliant work.

He quivered with excitement.

Someone was waving a hand in his face. He focused his eyes and looked coldly at the girl.

"Well?" he said.

"Could you tell us when you're going to give back our mid-term papers, Professor Neal?"

He stared at her. His right cheek twitched. He felt as if he were about to hurl every invective at his command into her face. His fists closed.

"You'll get them back when they're marked," he said tensely.

"Yes, but —"

"You heard me," he said. His voice rose at the end of the sentence. The girl sat down. As he lowered his head, he noticed that she looked at the boy next to her and shrugged her shoulders, a look of disgust on her face.

"Miss . . ." He fumbled with his record book and found her name. "Miss Forbes!"

She looked up, her features drained of color. Her red lips stood out sharply against her white skin. Painted alabaster idiot. The words clawed at him.

"You may get out of this room," he ordered sharply.

Confusion filled her face. "Why?" she asked in a thin plaintive voice.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," he said, the fury rising. "I said

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for you to get out of this room!"

"But —"

"Do you hear me!" he shouted.

Hurriedly she collected her books, her hands shaking. Her face burned with embarrassment. She kept her eyes on the floor and her throat moved convulsively as she edged along the aisle and went out the doorway.

The door closed behind her. He sank back. He felt a terrible sickness in himself. Now, he thought, they will all turn against me in defense of an addle-witted little girl. Dr. Ramsay will have more fuel for his simple little fire.

And they are right.

He could not keep his mind from saying it.

They *are* right. He knew it. In that far recess of his mind which he could not cow with thoughtless passion. I am a stupid fool. I have no right to teach others. I cannot even teach myself to be a human being. He wanted to cry out the words and weep confessions and throw himself from one of the open windows.

"The whispering will stop!" he demanded fiercely.

The room was quiet. He sat tensely, waiting for any signs of militance. I am your teacher, he thought. I am to be obeyed. I am. . . .

The concept died. He lost them. He drifted away again. What were students or a girl asking about mid-term papers? What was anything? Nothing at all mattered.

He glanced at his watch.

In a few minutes the train will pull into Centralia. She will change to the main line express into Indianapolis. Then up to Detroit and her mother. Gone.

Gone. He tried to visualize the word, put it into living terms. But the thought of the house without her was almost beyond his means. Because it wasn't the house without her. It was something else.

And he began to think of what John had said.

Was it possible? He was in a mood to accept the incredible. It was incredible that she had left him. Why not extend the impossibilities that were happening to him?

All right then, he thought angrily. The house is alive. I've given it this life with deadly outpourings of wrath. But —

The door opened. He glanced up. Dr. Ramsay stood there, face drawn into a mask of indignation. Behind him in the hall Chris could see the girl, her face streaked with tears.

"A moment, Neal," Ramsay said sharply. He stepped out into the hall again.

Chris sat at the desk staring at the door. He felt suddenly very tired, exhausted. He felt as if getting up and moving into the hall were more than he could possibly manage.

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He glanced at the class. A few of them were trying to repress smiles.

"For tomorrow you will finish the reading of *King Lear*," he said. Some of them groaned.

Ramsay appeared in the doorway again, his cheeks pink.

"Are you coming, Neal?" he asked loudly.

Chris felt himself tighten with anger as he walked across the room and out into the hall.

The girl lowered her eyes. She stood behind Dr. Ramsay's portly frame.

"What is this I hear, Neal?" Ramsay asked.

That's right, Chris thought. Don't ever call me Professor. I'll never be one, will I? You'll see to that, you bastard.

"I don't understand," he said, as coolly as possible.

"Miss Forbes here claims you ejected her from class for no reason at all."

"Then Miss Forbes is lying quite stupidly," he said. Let me hold this anger, he thought. Don't let it flood loose. He shook with holding it back.

The girl gasped at the accusation. She took out her handkerchief again. Ramsay turned and patted her shoulder.

"Go in my office, child. Wait for me." She turned away slowly. Politician! cried Neal's mind. How easy it is for you to be popular with them. You don't have to deal with their bungling minds.

Miss Forbes turned the corner and Ramsay looked back at Neal. "Your explanation had better be good," he said.

Chris didn't speak. Why am I standing here? he suddenly wondered. Why am I standing in this neon-lit hall and listening to this pompous boor berate me?

"I'm waiting, Neal."

Chris tightened. "I told you she was lying," he said quietly.

"I choose to believe otherwise," said Dr. Ramsay, his voice trembling.

A shudder ran through Chris. His head moved forward. He spoke slowly, with teeth clenched. "You can believe anything you damn well please."

Ramsay's mouth twitched. "I think it's time you appeared before the board," he said.

"Fine!" said Chris loudly. Ramsay made a move to close the classroom door. Chris gave it a kick and it banged against the wall. A girl gasped inside.

"What's the matter?" Chris yelled. "Don't you want your students to hear me tell you off? Don't you want them to suspect that you're a dolt, a windbag, an ass!"

Ramsay raised shaking fists before his chest. His lips trembled violently.

"This will do, Neal!" he cried.

Chris reached out and shoved the heavy man aside. He snarled,

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"Oh, damn, get out of my way."

He started down the hallway. He heard the bell ring. It sounded as though it were in another existence. The building throbbed with life. Students poured from classrooms.

"Neal!" called Dr. Ramsay.

He kept walking. Oh, God, let me out of here, I'm suffocating, he thought. My hat. My briefcase. Leave them. Get out of here.

Dizzily he descended the stairs, surrounded by milling students. They swirled about him like an unidentifiable tide. His brain was far from them. His steps were robot-like.

Staring ahead dully, he walked along the first-floor hall. He turned and went out the door and down the porch steps to the campus sidewalk. He paid no attention to students who stared at his ruffled blond hair, his mussed clothes. He kept walking. I've done it, he thought belligerently, I've made the break. I'm free!

All the way down to Main Street and out on the bus he kept renewing his stores of anger. He went over those few moments in the hallway again and again. He summoned up the vision of Ramsay's stolid face, repeated the words. He kept himself taut and furious.

I'm glad, he told himself forcibly. Everything is solved. Sally has left me. Good. She spoiled everything I had. She drained me of my talent. Now I'll be free of her — and able to write as I dreamed years ago. My job is gone. Good. Now I'm free to do as I like. I have all the time I'll need to put my words on the typewriter.

A strained and angry joy pounded through him. He felt alone, a stranger to the world and glad of it.

At his stop he got off the bus and walked determinedly toward the house, pretending to ignore the pain he felt at approaching it. It's just an empty house, he thought. Nothing more. Despite all puerile theories, *it is nothing but a house.*

He went in slowly. Everything seemed so quiet — so strange. The emptiness tore at him. Dizzy suddenly, he sank down on the couch and closed his eyes. He dug his nails into his palms. Oh, God, I *am* sick.

He twitched and looked around stupidly. What was it? This feeling that he was sinking into the couch, into the floor boards, dissolving in the air, joining the molecules of the house.

He whimpered softly, looking around. His head ached. He pressed a palm against his forehead. "What?" he muttered. "What?"

He stood up. As though there were fumes, he tried to smell them. As though it were a sound,

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he tried to hear it. He turned around to see the fear. As though it were something with depth and length and width. Something menacing.

He wavered. He fell back on the couch. He stared around. There was nothing. All intangible. The furniture lay as it had before. The sunlight filtered through the windows, piercing the gauzelike curtains, making gold patterns on the inlaid wood floor. The walls were still creamy. The ceiling was as it had been.

He pushed up and walked dizzily about the room. He forgot about Sally. He walked into the dining room. He touched the table. He stared at the dark oak wood.

He went into the kitchen. He stood by the sink and looked out the window. Then he stared down at the sink. He felt drunk. Everything was fuzzy on the edges.

She'd washed the cups before she left. The broken saucer was thrown away. He looked at the nick on his thumb. It was dried. He'd forgotten about it.

He looked around suddenly as if someone had sneaked behind him. He stared at the wall. Something was rising. He felt it. But that was silly. It had to be imagination.

Imagination!

Suddenly he slammed a fist on the sink. I'll write. Write. Write. Sit down and drain it all away in words. This feeling of anguish and terror and loneliness. Write it out of my system.

He ran from the kitchen. He refused to accept the fear of instinct in himself. He ignored the menace that seemed to thicken the very air.

A rug slipped. He kicked it aside.

He sat down. The air hummed. He tore the cover off the typewriter. He sat nervously, staring at the keyboard. The moment before attack. It was in the air. But it's my attack, he thought triumphantly. My attack on stupidity and fear!

He rolled a sheet into the typewriter. He tried to collect his throbbing thoughts. Write, the word called in his mind. Write. *Now.*

He felt the desk lurch against his shins. The flaring pain knifed through him. He kicked the desk in automatic frenzy. More pain. He kicked again. The desk flung back against him. He screamed.

He'd seen it move.

He tried to back off, the anger torn from him.

The typewriter keys moved under his hands. His eyes swept down. He couldn't tell whether he was moving the keys. Or whether they moved by themselves. He pulled hysterically, trying to dislodge his fingers.

He couldn't. The keys were moving faster than his eye could see. They were a blur of motion.

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He felt them shredding his skin. His fingers were peeled. They were raw. Blood started to ooze out. He cried and pulled. He managed to jerk away his fingers. He jumped back in the chair.

His belt buckle caught. The desk drawer came flying out. It slammed into his stomach. He yelled again. The pain was a black cloud pouring over his head.

He threw down a hand to shove in the drawer. He saw the yellow pencils lying there. They glared. His hand slipped. It banged into the drawer. One of the pencils jabbed him. He always kept the points sharp. It was like the bite of a snake. He snapped back his hand with a gasp of pain. The point was jammed under a nail. It was imbedded in raw tender flesh.

He cried out in fury and pain.

He pulled at the pencil with his other hand. The point flew out and jabbed into his palm. He couldn't get rid of the pencil. It kept dragging over his hand. He pulled at it. It tore black jagged lines on his skin. It tore the skin open.

He heaved the pencil across the room. It bounced from the wall. It seemed to jump as it fell on the eraser. It rolled over and was still.

He lost his balance. The chair fell back with a rush. His head banged sharply against the floorboards. His outclutched hand grabbed at the window sill. Tiny splinters flashed into his skin like invisible needles.

He howled in deathly fear. He kicked his legs. The mid-term papers showered down over him like the beating wings of insane bird flocks.

The chair snapped up again on its springs. The heavy wheels rolled over his raw bloody hands. He drew them back with a shriek. He reared a leg and kicked the chair over violently. It crashed on its side against the mantelpiece. The wheels spun and chattered like a swarm of furious insects.

He jumped up. He lost his balance and fell again. He crashed against the window sill. The curtains fell on him like a python. The rods snapped. They flew down and struck him across the scalp. He felt warm blood trickle across his forehead.

He thrashed about on the floor. The curtains seemed to writhe around him like serpents. He screamed again. He tore at them wildly. His eyes were terror-stricken.

He threw them off. He lurched up suddenly. He staggered around for balance. The pain in his hands assailed him. He looked at them. They were like raw butcher meat, skin hanging down in shreds.

He had to bandage them. He turned toward the bathroom. At his first step the rug slid from under him. The rug he had kicked

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aside. It was back in place. He felt himself rush through the air. He reached down his hands instinctively, trying to block the fall.

The white pain made his body leap. One finger snapped. Splinters shot into his raw fingers. He felt a burning pain in one ankle.

He tried to scramble up. The floor was like ice under him. He slid toward the bathroom. His screams choked off. He was deadly silent. His heart thudded in his chest. He tried to rise again. He fell. He hissed in pain.

The bookshelf loomed over him.

He cried out and flung up an arm. The case came crashing down on him. The top shelf drove into his skull. Black waves dashed over him. A sharp pain blade drove into his brain.

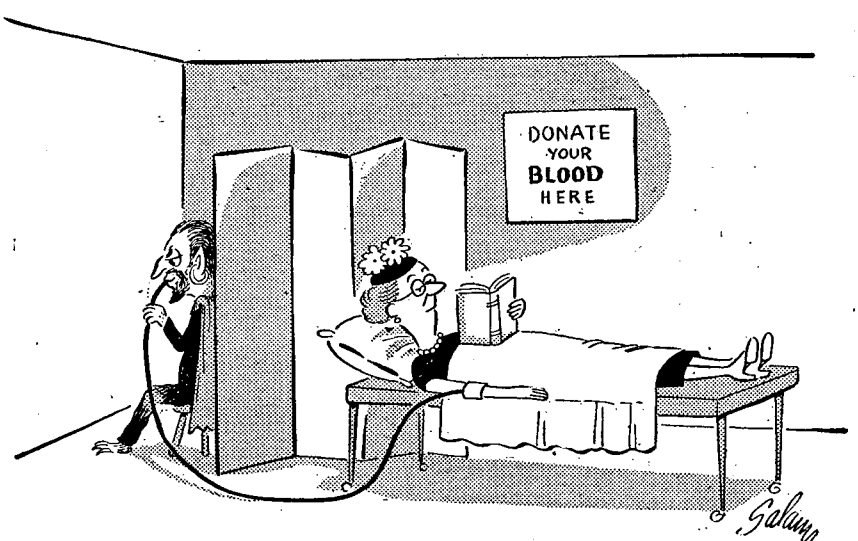
Books showered over him. He rolled on his side with a groan. He tried to crawl out from underneath. He shoved books aside weakly. They fell open. He felt the page edges slicing into his fingers like razor blades.

The pain cleared his head. He sat up. He hurled the books aside. He kicked the bookcase back against the wall. The back fell off it and it crashed down.

He rose up. The room spun before his eyes. He staggered into the wall. He tried to hold on. The wall shifted under his hands. He could not hold on. He slipped to his knees, pushed up again.

"Bandage myself," he muttered hoarsely.

The words filled his brain. He



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staggered up, through the dining room. Into the bathroom.

He stopped. No! Get out of the house! Better to get out!

He tried to turn. But he slipped on the tiles and cracked his elbow against the edge of the bathtub. A shooting pain barbed into his upper arm. The arm went numb. He sprawled on the floor, writhing.

He sat up, breath tearing at his throat. He pushed himself up. His arm shot out. He pulled at the cabinet door. It flew open into his cheek. It tore a jagged rip in the soft flesh.

His head snapped back. The crack in the ceiling looked like a wide idiot smile on a blank white face. He whimpered in fright.

He tried to back away.

His hand reached out. For iodine, gauze, his mind cried.

His hand came out with the razor.

It flopped in his hand like a new-caught fish. His other hand reached in. For iodine, gauze!

His hand came out with dental floss. It flooded out of the tube like an endless white worm. It coiled around his throat and shoulders. It choked him.

The long shiny blade slipped from its sheath.

He could not stop his hand. It drew the razor across his chest.

It slit open the shirt. It sliced a valley through his flesh.

Blood spurted out.

He tried to hurl away the razor. It stuck to his hand. It slashed at him. At his arms and hands and legs and body.

A scream of utter horror flooded from his lips. He ran from the bathroom. His feet carried him into the living room.

"Sally!" he screamed, "Sally, Sally, Sally . . ."

The razor touched his throat. The room went black. Pain. Life ebbing away into night. Silence over all the world.

Hideaway For a Head

MEDICAL science boasts a number of instances of self-surgery — but none as major as the case reported by a Denver, Colorado paper back in September 1866. A lodger in a Denver boarding house was not seen or heard of for several days. The landlady became worried and had his locked door battered down.

Inside, laid out in state on the bed, they found the boarder's headless body. Nearby was a farewell note which read: "I can stand it no longer. I am committing suicide by cutting off my head. I am hiding it where no one will ever find it."

With this evidence to go on, the alert coroner turned in a justifiable verdict of suicide.

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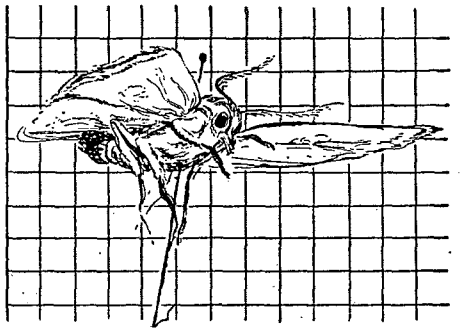

ISLE OF BLIGHT

By SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS

There's been a great deal of to-do lately about the place of bacteria in warfare. Scatter a few germs around, the theory goes, and your enemy will keel over like Zygophyllaceae in a high wind. Most of such talk is sheer fantasy, of course, even though it does have a basis in fact.

However, there is a perfectly sound type of bacteriological weapon, one you're sure to be hearing about before long. Samuel Hopkins Adams, who has long been one of America's top ranking authors, tells about it in this thrill-packed yarn.

EVEN at midday a face at the window of my island shack would be startling. Casual visitors do not find their way through the maze of the Inland Waterways to my remote hideout. This face, materializing in a swale of moonlight between the magnolias, gave my nerves a twitch. It was

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more dead than alive. So was the voice that came from it.

"Are you alone?"

"Not wholly," I said, taking from my desk drawer a loaded automatic which I laid before me with some ostentation.

"May I come in?" the voice asked.

"Walk slowly," I said.

He paused in the doorway, blinking his scarlet-rimmed eyes in the light. "Could I have a drink?" he asked, still in those inhumanly lifeless tones.

I motioned him to the primitive sideboard. "How did you get here?" I asked.

He poured out a little brandy and took two careful, slow swallows before replying. "I rowed from Charleston."

"Forty miles?" I said incredulously.

He held out his hands. The palms were rags and tatters of bloody skin. "I'm traveling rather privately," he said with an effortless grin.

"Better let me attend to those hands," I said. "I'm a physician."

"I know. P & S '33. Hamilton '29."

"You're well posted. Do I know you?"

"Rindge, '26. We met at commencement five years ago."

I taxed my memory. "You're something rather distinguished in science, aren't you?"

He nodded. "I've done a bit of work on the destructive hemipterae."

I gave him a lead. "You haven't come to my island to hunt bugs, I suppose."

"No. I want to buy it."

"Buy Little Tisket?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Some work in which I am interested."

"It's not for sale."

"Name your own price."

"Look," I said. "This is my retreat. I can hide myself here when I have problems to work out. It's the merest luck that you caught me, or even found the place."

He produced a detailed chart from his pocket. "No luck at all. We know all about it. It is exactly what we need."

I began to feel uncomfortable. Melodrama is out of my line. "I don't like mysteries," I said. This is not strictly true. I like mysteries well enough, but prefer not to be mixed up in them. "What do you need the place for?"

He had dozed off, on his feet. Now he aroused himself with a twitch and a jerk. "To save the world," he muttered.

"Come now, Rindge," I said. "This is the year 1952, the sovereign State of South Carolina, I am a physician in good and regular standing and you materialize out of a moonbeam and tell me that you need my island to save the world."

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"You think I'm crazy," he said.

He certainly looked it at the moment, though that may have been the strain of concentrating against his deadly weariness. I did not think it necessary to answer.

"All right," he said. "There's your telephone. Call up the White House and ask for the President."

"The line is busy," I said.

My flippancy was too much for him. "Oh, for God's sake!" he cried angrily. Then, controlling himself, "Let me do it, then. I can't keep up much longer," he added in a sort of groan.

It was obviously true. His face was ghastly. Against my better judgment I made way for him at the desk. There was a brief colloquy, a code reference to a project Triple Zero, and my caller beckoned me to the apparatus. The voice that sounded in my ear almost lifted me out of my boots. I had heard the President over the radio too often to have any doubts as to who was speaking. My babbling attempt at explanation was cut short.

"You are to hold yourself at the disposition of the man who is with you, please," the voice directed. "Good-bye."

I turned to my caller, who had staggered to the divan and now lay breathing heavily. "If the government wants my island they can have it," I said. "On loan, to be returned when they will be completely finished with it."

"When we are through," he croaked, "it won't be worth returning."

A fit of coughing racked him. He set a hand to his throat. There was dread in his face. I went to him and made a quick examination. He caught at my sleeve.

"Pneumonia?" he gasped.

"I'm afraid so."

"Thank God!" he breathed and collapsed in a faint.

II

Patients who thank God for pneumonia are not common in my practice. Nor am I accustomed to receiving person-to-person orders from the President. No powerful effort of reasoning was required to convince me that a considerable measure of secrecy was indicated. Little immediate help was to be had from the sick man. He was no more than semiconscious. Hospitalization was indicated, but that would have involved questions which I couldn't answer. Loading him into my motor boat, I took him to my bachelor bungalow on the Beaufort waterfront and got him to bed without anyone seeing us. So far, so good.

It was a slight attack. Exhaustion was the adverse factor, but was more than compensated for by the patient's fierce determination to recover. "When can I get to the island? When shall I be fit

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for work?" That was the daily burden of his impatience. Against my professional judgment I let myself be overborne by his importunities and set an imprudently early day for his release. He justified it by a phenomenal upturn of condition.

The day before his official discharge he sat silent at dinner, drumming on the table.

"Carter," he said abruptly, "did I talk?"

I knew that he was referring to his lapses into semidelirium. "A little," I answered.

"Did I mention names?"

"Some. Don't worry about it."

"Anyone you know?"

"Yes. A patient of mine."

He sat in scowling abstraction. "Claestres?" he shot out.

"Yes."

"What did I say about him?"

I looked him in the eyes. "I've forgotten," I said.

Across his austere and furrowed face passed something that might almost have been taken for a smile. "Good man!" he muttered. He paused again in reflection. "Just the same," he continued, "it might be useful for you to be briefed a bit on that gentleman. We know little and suspect much of Baron Claestres. As Collabrian minister he serves one of the most poverty-stricken little sinks of iniquity in Eastern Europe, yet he is able to live like a millionaire in Washington and to buy an expensive plantation down here."

"You think there's something phony about him?" I asked.

"Where does he get that kind of money, if he is serving his own country alone?" Rindge countered.

"He's very popular with the plantation people," I remarked.

"What are you treating him for?" he asked.

"Rindge," I said, "I am a physician. Baron Claestres is my patient."

As a rebuke it failed of any satisfactory effect. The scientist said absently, "Well, keep an eye on him." Evidently he had something else on his mind. Presently it came out. "Carter," he said, "I think we are going to need you, full time, on the island."

"Oh? What about my practice?"

"Damn your practice! This is more important than any practice. Aren't you convinced yet?"

Well, I was convinced, or pretty nearly. Still, I demurred. "Too much secrecy," I complained. "What are my duties to be?"

He said slowly, "To keep those of us on the island alive for the next six weeks or more. At least," he added on a somber half-tone, "as many of us as possible."

"What's the matter with your people?" I asked, startled.

"Nothing, so far."

"What's the threat then?"

"Death."

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This exasperated me. "Will you kindly cut out the melodrama and talk straight talk?" I said.

"Death from coughing," he said. "That's all I can tell you."

"It isn't enough," I retorted. "Pertussis isn't fatal, *per se*."

"This kind has been."

"Details and data," I insisted. "Coughs have a cause. What are the symptoms?"

"None. No initial illness. No cold. No fever until the last stage. The cough, exhaustion, and death."

"That's scientifically absurd," I declared.

"I hear you say it," he retorted. "But they're dead."

"They? Who? How many?"

"Thirty-seven thus far. From all the experiment stations: Pasadena to Boston: washerwomen to Ph.D.s. Of the major scientists, the ones who do the important work, there were originally twelve. Three of us are left."

"Where are they?"

He tapped himself on the breastbone. "The other two are on your island. Any other questions?"

"Yes. What about the recovered cases?"

"No recoveries. Absolutely none."

"You mean to tell me that everyone affected died? One hundred per cent mortality? But that's incredible! Why haven't I seen anything about it in the medical journals?"

"We kept it quiet. It would have done no good to have scareheads in the papers."

The case histories which he presented were exasperatingly vague. Only too plainly the attending doctors were all at sea. The patients developed a sudden cough which yielded to no treatment. Death ensued in from three to five days depending upon the natural resistance of the sufferer. The onset of the disease was capricious. Workers in close contact with those affected escaped. It defied all the rules of infection.

I came to a foolish decision which I have never regretted. "Give me three days to arrange my affairs and I'm with you," I told Rindge.

He merely nodded as one who had expected it all along. "We're going to need someone to cook and look after the place," he said. "Can you get us a reliable man? He'll have to stay on the island."

"Leave it to me," I answered confidently.

Crispus Johnson was the man I had in mind. He was a Gullah Negro, elderly, faithful, stupid, and superstitious, who eked out an uncertain livelihood as a crabber, and lived, squatterwise, on an islet near my place. Regular wages would appeal to him. He had worked for me; I knew him to be a fair utility cook.

One more matter remained: the now interesting Baron Claestres.

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I made some casual and prudent inquiries. The diplomat's pursuits, it appeared, were all open and aboveboard. His special hobby was his greenhouses in which he grew rare and exotic flowers. All were open to his friends except one inner compartment which, he explained, was devoted to experimentation with delicate growths and must be kept dark and airless most of the time. He was understood, also, to be interested in Gullah superstitions, with special reference to the quaint lore and practices of the root-doctors. All of which seemed, at the time, to be without significance.

I called at the Claestres plantation to suggest a day's fishing later and also, semi-officially, to see whether the trouble for which I had treated him was cured. The Baron received me with that smiling suavity which explained his local popularity. He was a youngish man, large, strongly built, blond, and sanguine to the point of pinkness, quite different in type from the usual Eastern European. In response to my query he smiled and said there was nothing to see; everything was satisfactorily cleared up.

A month earlier both forearms had been maculous with patches as angry as any I had ever seen on the human skin. At the time of treatment I interrogated him closely, for the manifestation puzzled me. Had he been working in chemicals? No. Ever had anything of the sort before? Never. What about poison ivy, then? I put the question doubtfully, since the blotches lacked the typical pustulation of the Rhus toxicodendron; they were worse inflamed and caused a more intolerable itching. At first he returned a negative, then thought it over and recalled that while working in his garden two days earlier he had rooted out some invading strips of a bright-green, three-leaved plant. Would that be it?

I told him that the description answered, and treated him for ivy poisoning because I had no other clue. The inflammation did not respond well to the treatment.

It did not occur to me to confirm the presence of the plant by investigation. Had I done so I should have learned that Rhus toxicodendron grew neither in the garden nor anywhere else on or near the Claestres plantation.

III

Little Tisket was a changed spot when I reported under cover of darkness for my new duty. My shack had been turned into a scientific laboratory, with unfamiliar impedimenta on all sides. Tents and two portable houses had been set up in the concealing shrubbery to accommodate a dozen men who impressed me, as I met them, with

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that quietly concentrated expression typical of the working scientist. All bore conventional and presumptively assumed names: Smith, Jones, Levy, Robinson, Williams, Clark. Rindge, who was in command, answered to the name of Brown.

The next morning Rindge woke me at dawn. "You're none too soon," he said ominously.

The sound of coughing from a nearby tent gave point to what he said. I felt a sense of professional elation. Here was my chance to observe at first hand the mysterious ailment, perhaps to solve the problem which had baffled so many of my colleagues.

The man to whom Rindge took me was a middle-aged laboratory worker of frail physique, called Williams. His cough was dry, sharp, continuous. I drugged him as heavily as I dared; no opiate gave him relief. He was racked throughout the day.

In the intervals of caring for him, I examined the rest of the island population, one after another, including Crispus Johnson, the Gullah cook. All were in good physical condition, though I could not say as much for their nerves. They were convinced that Williams was doomed. They were right. Working in the dark, I tried every resource of medical science in vain. My patient died early on the third day.

The autopsy revealed nothing more than a super-irritation of the throat membranes. No disease, in the accepted meaning of the term, was present. Something unidentifiable by any method known to science had fastened upon poor Williams' throat and destroyed him.

We buried him privately at the end of the islet. Rindge read the service while the others stood about with lowered heads and restless eyes which asked the dread question: Who next?

I noticed a light in Rindge's shack late that night. With the intention of advising a sedative, I walked over there. I did not enter alone. As I swung the screen door ajar, a small, fuzzy-white night-flyer darted in and went bumping against wall and ceiling until it collapsed on Rindge's desk. Jones, who was busy with some slides in the far corner, came over to peer at it.

"Hello!" he said. "How did that fellow get here?"

"Came in to investigate the light, like any other moth, I suppose," Rindge answered.

"Lucky he didn't blunder down your neck. You wouldn't be able to button your collar for a fortnight."

"Poisonous?" I asked in surprise.

"Irritant in a high degree. What puzzles me is that the creature should be here at all. This is

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the notorious brown-tail moth. Its proper habitat is a thousand miles to the north."

"Maybe it's a long-distance traveller," I suggested.

"Or somebody hereabouts might be breeding them," Rindge added.

"No, to both of you," Jones said decisively. "Its flight is short. And why should anyone want to raise the obnoxious things when New England spends hundreds of thousands of dollars getting rid of them?"

"Anyway, it will do no harm to make some inquiries," I said.

With no special expectation of results, I wrote an acquaintance in the Bureau of Entomology in Washington for information on the subject. In routine time it came. Meanwhile, tragedy had struck again.

Clark was a specially trained filing clerk, plethoric and full-blooded. The cough set in just after luncheon. It was of exceptional violence and wholly beyond alleviation. I foresaw the end which came after four hours of convulsions. A blood vessel ruptured; the patient died in my arms.

The next case developed only two days later. Murphy, an anatomical microscopist, after a three-day struggle put an end to the agony of slow strangulation by throwing himself from the end of the pier. It is evidence of the decline of our morale that no great effort was made to rescue him.

None of the three victims was of essential importance, Rindge told me. "It's the blunderbuss method, just as at the three other stations," he said gloomily. "The man or men at the other end of the gun are after Robinson, Levy, and me, and how many lives are sacrificed in the attempt doesn't matter."

Questioning him directly was usually fruitless, but I tried it now. "You think that Baron Claestres is involved, don't you, Rindge?"

He frowned. "Involved?" he repeated. "There's nothing to show that. Put it this way: I think he is interested in our little experiment."

"I don't see that I've been of the least use to you," I burst out. "How much longer, Rindge?"

"I wish I could give you a date. We're making good progress, but the loss of these men slows us up, of course. I should think that if we can keep going two or three weeks more . . ."

"Well? What then?" I asked impatiently as he paused.

"Ah, then — then —" I have seldom seen a grimmer smile — "we may discourage the Baron and his friends with a show that will make the atom bomb seem like a merry jest."

"Are you going to blow up my island?" I cried.

He made no reply, but lapsed into the gloom which was now the

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prevailing atmosphere of the camp. Crispus Johnson alone did not share it. The old Gullah went about his manifold duties, placid and efficient, smiling to himself and humming a snatch of his favorite spiritual:

Sinna-man, sinnah-man; yeddy yo' doom!
De yearth ain' nuttin' but a silent tomb.

"See here, Crispus," I said to him, "why aren't you scared?"

He smiled complacently. "I gotta chahm."

"Oh? You have? Where did you get it? Dr. Buzzard?"

From the way he blinked I knew that I had hit the mark. Dr. Buzzard was the leading island "doctor"; dealer in roots, spells, charms, love potions, and death "conjurs". All authentic root-doctors are called either Dr. Buzzard or Dr. Bug. Nobody knows why.

"I got money, too," he continued happily. "Reckon to buy me one o' dem li'l chug-chug machines fo' my li'l boat."

"An outboard motor costs better than a hundred dollars," I said. "Where do you get that kind of money?"

His expression became secretive. "Dig in de dahk o' de moon," he murmured. He wished me to believe that he had come upon buried treasure, which is the Gullah's dream. Somebody had been prompting him. Dr. Buzzard?

"Crispus, have you been leaving the island against your promise?" I asked sharply.

"Nossuh."

"Has somebody been coming here to see you then?"

"Nossuh," he repeated.

"Then how does all this money reach you? And what do you do to earn it?"

He gave me a scared look. Not a word more could I get out of him. Evidently he now regretted having told me anything. Knowing something of Gullah ways, I assumed that secrecy had been imposed upon him, quite possibly by the "doctor" under the familiar threat of "putting a root" on him, thereby causing him "to wither and to wane".

Some kind of skullduggery was going on, which might have little or much to do with the strange and tragic happenings on my island. If my suspicions regarding Crispus were correct, there were probably nocturnal visits to the place. I set about methodically examining the beaches on all sides. Not for a week did I find the unmistakable keel-mark where a small "flat" of the type common among the islands had been hauled up on the sand. That day there was something approaching panic in camp.

Levy, the Number Three man, was seized at the breakfast table, immediately after taking a long

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draught of water from the large cooler that served us all. With incredible fortitude he worked day and night — the incessant cough allowed him no sleep — for nearly four days before taking an overdose of the opiate which I had left for him. Through his devotion, he was able to leave his part of the work in such shape that it could be taken over. But this imposed extra labor and strain upon the two surviving scientists. To make matters worse, a general utility man called Taylor disappeared after Levy's burial. He had swum out into the swift and dangerous current, as we afterward learned, and been picked up by a pair of fishermen and taken to the mainland.

"If I had caught him deserting, I'd have shot him dead," Rindge declared bitterly. And I believe he would.

After finding the trace of the intruding flatboat, I decided to try a policy of bullying upon old Crispus. I began by reminding him of his promise of secrecy, and impressing upon him the dire penalties which the government could invoke for treacherous conduct.

"Now, Crispus," I said sternly, "I want the truth out of you."

"Yassuh."

"Somebody has been visiting you on this island."

"Yassuh."

"Dr. Buzzard?"

To my astonishment, he admitted it without hesitation.

"He gave you that money?" I asked.

"Yassuh."

"For doing what?"

"Magicking."

"What sort of magic?"

A quite harmless sort, the old Gullah assured me. All that was required of him was that every morning, on completion of his cleaning-up, he should scatter a little spell in the main workroom. The spells were contained in small paper bags which Dr. Buzzard delivered in his boat. After shaking out the bag, Crispus burned it, by the doctor's instructions. That was all. I put the question which had been puzzling me throughout his frank disclosures.

"How come you are telling me all this, Crispus? Aren't you afraid that Dr. Buzzard will conjure you?"

"Nossuh."

"Why not?"

"He daid."

"Dr. Buzzard dead?" I exclaimed. "When?"

"Coupla days since. Cough an' couldn' stop noways."

I stared. "A cough! What —"

"Reckon somebody put a root on *him*," the old fellow said composedly.

The pattern was forming vaguely in my mind. But not until I received from Washington the

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reply to my query about the brown-tail moth did it stand forth in any real definition. Rindge, who had taken the launch into Beaufort that day, brought out my mail. My entomological friend had enclosed several pamphlets on Euproctus Chrysorrhea with his brief note, politely hoping that some of them might serve my purpose. The very first one did, and startlingly. I read:

> Some of the microscopic hairs of the caterpillar, known as nettling hairs, are furnished with minute barbs, causing an eruption considerably worse than that produced by poison ivy. These are present, also, in the moth.

There stood forth to my excited vision a pair of muscular arms, crimson with those angrily inflamed patches. "Worse than poison ivy" indeed! Then I read an afternote in handwriting at the foot of the last page. I raised a wild shout.

"Rindge! Rindge! I've got it! Here's the answer!"

There was no response. From the far end of the building I heard the ominous sound. Rindge was on the back veranda supporting Robinson, who was convulsed in the first of the deadly paroxysms.

IV

Three of us were in my motor launch as it approached Little Tisket on that spring morning. Rindge and I had picked up Baron Claestres at his place and were taking him out to Ashepoo Mouth, ostensibly for a try at the blackfish. It was the first meeting between the two men, and I thought to discern a quick alerting of the diplomat's glance as the introduction was made. Did he perhaps recognize my companion from description or photograph? I thought it not unlikely. Those people are kept well posted by their secret service.

The island lay luxuriant and deserted in the warm morning glow. The survivors had left, as they came, secretly and under cover of darkness. As we neared the terminal sandspit, Rindge shut off the engine. The swift tide-rip carried us close in shore. I took a long look.

Never, I thought with a sharp pang, had my shaded retreat been more lovely. It was a bower of luxuriantly flowering trees, vines, and shrubbery, planted long since by the winds of profuse nature: magnolia, chinaberry, locust, jasmine, wild azalea, and a score of other growths. Even that evil pariah among plants, the cactus, was flowering after rain. Soft fragrances were blown about us as we drifted, tide-borne. There was no sign of life around the buildings or tents. An osprey hovered above her nest and several black buzzards circled high, uncertain

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whether or not we were prospective prey.

"A beauty spot, indeed," Claestres said to me pleasantly. "I envy you its possession."

"A historic spot quite possibly after today," Rindge said.

He took from his pocket what looked like a small cocoanut of some ceramic ware. The Baron eyed it.

"The experiment of which you spoke?" he asked.

Rindge nodded absently.

"A bomb perhaps?" Claestres continued with smiling interest.

"Not exactly," the scientist answered. "Rather more comprehensive in effect."

He lobbed the missile into a sparkleberry thicket where it shattered with a light tinkling.

"Not an explosive, I perceive," the other commented. "What, then, is its nature? Or is that a secret?"

"No secret," Rindge replied. "Do you know anything of a small insect called a scale?"

"They attack fruit trees, I believe."

"Some have a wider appetite."

"Ah? Well, I must confess to ignorance of such subjects," the Baron said apologetically.

"We shall see something of it later," Rindge promised as he started the engine.

We proceeded to our anchorage where we had luncheon, our guest contributing a bottle of vintage champagne. Our luck was good for some three hours. Then the tide slackened and turned, and the blackfish went elsewhere about their business.

"Fini for today," Rindge said, reeling in. "Let's go back to Little Tisket."

"To observe your experiment?" the Baron asked.

"As a horticulturist you should be interested. Are you an entomologist as well?"

"Very little. You ask apropos of your scales?"

"Not for the moment," Rindge said with deliberation. "I had in mind Euproctus Chrysorrhea."

If we were correct in the theory upon which we had built the day's strategy, this should have been a blow right between the eyes. Baron Claestres did not so much as blink.

"Euproctus . . . ?" he repeated interrogatively.

"Chrysorrhea. The brown-tail moth."

The Baron seemed to consider. "I have heard of it."

"Around here?"

He made a vague gesture. "That I do not recall. Is it native to the region?"

"That's the point. It is not. Yet it has recently been found here, a thousand miles from its proper habitat."

"Very interesting," the other said coolly. "They are far travel-

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lers then, these moths?"

"On the contrary. Since they are here, they have been brought in for some purpose." Rindge changed his tone. "To return to our scales," he said briskly, "I can now speak of an experiment which up to the present has been conducted secretly — or so we had hoped. A group of specialists with which I am connected has been developing a species of super-scale with greatly enhanced range and power of destruction."

"Ah, you scientists! Where will you stop!" the Baron commented lightly.

"We have been hampered — almost thwarted, indeed — by an inexplicable medical phenomenon. Dr. Carter can tell you more of that."

"A prevalent cough of unprecedented severity." I took up the record. "It has broken out in our experiment stations."

"Epidemic?" Claestres asked.

"Hardly, since we have heard of it nowhere else. The symptoms, too, or rather the lack of them, are widely at variance with any of the recognized forms of influenza, for example. We must seek farther for the cause of the fatalities. We *are* seeking farther."

"Fatalities?" he repeated. "So?" He nodded as one who brings something to mind. "Those rumors from your island. They were true, then?"

"Five deaths here on the island. One outside. Thirty-seven at the other stations."

"And the cause undiscovered? What a humiliating failure of medical science, Dr. Carter!"

"The failure is on the other side," Rindge retorted. "So near to success, too! One more death, the right one, and we'd have been ditched. I escaped, Baron."

"Congratulations," Claestres murmured.

"Yes," Rindge pursued, "I've been luckier than better men, any one of whom could have finished the job as well. And I'm the only one left to witness its success or failure."

"It is not yet assured, then, this experiment?" the Baron asked quickly; a little too quickly.

"We shall know in a few minutes. Let's get back to our interesting alien, the Euproctus moth. Dr. Carter hit its trail through the chance entrance of a specimen into our workroom one night."

"It produced an extremely irritating rash on my neck," I said. This, of course, was pure invention. I had a point to make. "Not unlike the poison ivy rash for which I treated you, Baron," I added. "By the way, I should like to see if there are any traces left."

"None," he said curtly.

"The moth was our first clue," Rindge resumed. "The second was the sudden affluence of our Gullah cook. He had been hired by the

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local root-doctor to do a bit of magicking. Do you know anything of these root-doctors, Baron?"

"Very little."

"Never heard of Dr. Buzzard?"

"Oh, yes! There is one in every settlement, I understand."

"Our Dr. Buzzard is dead. Of the same cough of which I told you."

"A patient of Dr. Carter's like the others?" the Baron asked with a touch of malice.

I let it pass. Rindge resumed his narrative.

"Suppose we get to the point. Somebody had been supplying black magic — or shall we say brown? — to the late Dr. Buzzard with specific instructions as to its use. The Doctor made up his little parcels and delivered them to old Crispus, our cook. In the morning Crispus tidied up the big room, fetched in the tub of ice for the day's use, and then scattered the invisible magic from the bag abroad in the air. I daresay he delivered an incantation at the same time. Would you be interested to know the content of the bags, Baron Claestres?"

"Certainly," he said. What else could he say?

"The nettling-hairs of the brown-tail moth."

"To irritate the skins of the working staff and keep them from their tasks, one supposes," Claestres surmised with an indulgent laugh. I could not help admiring his ease.

"Many did not get off so light," Rindge said sombrely. "Even after we discovered these operations, we might have missed the answer. With death striking from all sides, a man's logical processes become foggy. But a scrawled footnote to an official report on the Euproctus cleared it up for us. Read it, Carter."

I took the pamphlet from my pocket and read the postscript which my informant in the Bureau of Entomology had written.

> I forgot to mention an interesting item which may be quite foreign to the line of your interest. Back in 1924 two young Russian microscopists, working with the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture, either inhaled or swallowed some of the Euproctus hairs which set up a persistent and eventually fatal cough.

Our guest listened with polite attention and an unmoved face. But the clear pink of his complexion had paled to a muddy hue.

"Quite a railway-stand thriller," he said.

"With the added element of fact in this case," Rindge returned. "The air may have carried the devilish little barbs. But I think it more likely that they settled on the ice and were swallowed in the drinking water."

Our guest actually managed a very creditable yawn. "I'm afraid

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there's a weakness in your picturesque theory, my dear fellow," he said. "If your assumption is correct, how did anyone escape? Why did not the whole staff contract this wonderful deadly cough?"

"Because in most cases the tiny hairs would slip down the throat without lodging. It is a hit-or-miss method. Given time, it must have got us all. You see the process, of course. Someone who was willing to spread death in order to prevent our success, raised the caterpillars, gathered the crop of deadly hairs, and found an agent to place them — in this case the poor root-doctor who was presumptively quite ignorant of what he was doing."

Claestres said hardily, "You have, one assumes, traced down the worker of these fantastic miracles."

Rindge shook his head. "We lack conclusive proof as yet. This much we know: that the principal in the scheme has been shipping out his stuff to our various laboratories for a year or more. Well, he can stop now." He swung the wheel to avoid a sand-bar. "I think we shall find evidence that the killer has lost his game."

The boat rounded the north point of Polawana, bringing us into sudden view of our camp. Prepared though I was, I could not choke back a groan of shock and horror. Even Rindge gasped. Claestres jumped to his feet and staggered to the rail, staring.

Death had swept the island. The sweet verdure of pine, gum, and oak was shrivelled to colorless tatters. A swift, invisible flame had eaten its way, high and low, leaving blackened devastation behind it. It was the abomination of desolation, wrought in three short hours by the minute terror which science had loosed upon the land. No sound came from that blighted area except the faint, dry crepitation of the skeletons of vegetable life.

The hen osprey rose from her nest, shrieking, and flew, her wing-beat sharp in the stillness. Ripples in the water nearby marking the progress of squirrels, diamond-back rattlers, and a pair of slow, bewildered terrapin, showed that animate nature was abandoning those shores where inanimate nature lay dead.

Rindge, his poise recovered, said quietly to Claestres: "Well, Baron, there will be no war."

"No?" the diplomat muttered. "No war? I fail to see —"

"Use your eyes," Rindge interrupted sharply. "What war-attempting country would have a defense against *that?*" His arm swept the arc of the devastation.

"How — how far does it extend?"

"As far as we choose. In this instance, the whole island. No life left. And achieved with what? A

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pinch of snuff. Hardly more."

"Do I understand —" the Baron began, but Rindge cut in on him again.

"Yes; all this from the small capsule you saw me throw. And it is by no means our most effective destroyer. This is but our Number Two scale in virulence. Our Number One we have not yet found the means of checking. Once let loose, even in the smallest quantity . . ." His wide-armed sweep took in the horizons, eloquently completing the unuttered threat.

"I should like to land," Claestres said.

"Not now," Rindge returned. "You can observe as well and more safely from here. Imagine what a plane could loose upon enemy forests and fields. A nation could be blighted. A nation? A continent."

I asked, "For how long, Rindge?"

"Nobody knows. Long enough to wipe out all life, certainly. Nothing that grows from the kindly earth would escape. The scale would destroy all like an irresistible fire. Utter and total sterility."

"It is a military apothegm that for every weapon a defense can be developed," the Baron said with a painful effort.

"Military? Do you propose to pit military force against our scale?" Rindge laughed. "What could the most formidable army do against the insect billions? Can bombs blast them or barriers check their advance? Once the doom is launched, nothing can stop it. Nothing, I tell you!"

A naked tree which, when we had passed that way before had been a gracious cypress, sagged over slowly, toppled, and fell into the water to be plucked away by the tide.

Claestres said dully, "I think I should like to return to my home, if you will be so kind."

We delivered him, silent and thoughtful, to his landing. He made his adieux in form. But I noticed that he had to be helped into his waiting car by his chauffeur.

"Long-distance to Washington will be busy the rest of the day," Rindge prophesied, "and the cables will be hot tonight. No, Carter; there will be no war."

Within twenty-four hours, important-looking strangers began to emerge from airplane and train. They went forth unobtrusively upon the face of the waters and observed my island with interest and trepidation. To Rindge, who politely invited them to land, they returned equally polite refusals. They looked blank when he asked whether they were friends of Baron Claestres.

"If I were Claestres," Rindge observed to me, "I should not

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put too much faith in these gentlemen. I think I should go away. Far away. Patagonia. Or maybe Thibet."

"Why?" I asked.

"The kind of persons who employ Claestres' kind of person," he explained, "are intolerant of failure. Our friend has failed. Besides, he knows too much."

A summons to Washington came shortly for me; I was to give my report on events on Little Tisket. Returning, I was met at Yemassee by Rindge. I asked about Claestres.

"Ah!" said Rindge. "I told you that he should have gone to Thibet. Didn't I?"

"Well? Come on!" I said impatiently.

"There has been an accident. Let's assume that it was an accident, in the absence of proof to the contrary."

"To Claestres?"

"Those inquiring foreigners," said Rindge, who seemed to be exasperatingly indisposed to give a direct answer to a direct question. "The ones who were so interested in Little Tisket."

"My island!" I groaned. "I never want to set eyes on it again."

"Oh, wait four or five years," my companion consoled me. "It may come back. Not so the Baron."

"Dead?"

Rindge nodded. "You arrive too late for observation. After four of those visiting gentlemen called on him one evening, he got mysteriously locked into that inner compartment of his conservatory where the brown-tails are hatched from the cocoon. Hundreds of them. Bumbling and battering about in that enclosed space. All night. Think what the air would be to breathe. He may have been drugged, too, which would make him inhale the more deeply."

"The cough?" I asked superfluously.

"A powerful constitution, the Baron's," Rindge said. "He lasted five days."

I believe that I shuddered. "He had it coming to him," I said. "Still . . ."

"The forty-fourth casualty from our brown-tailed agency." Rindge assumed the detached tone of the scientist to whom life and death are but impersonal phenomena. "After all," he mused, "what are forty-four dead men? Or forty-four thousand? Science has saved the day. There will be no war."

MAN, biologically considered . . . is the most formidable of all the beasts of prey, and, indeed, the only one that preys systematically on its own species.

— William James, *Memories and Studies*

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Cartoon: Mendoza

". . . and just a stone's throw from the station."

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Illustrator: L. R. Summers

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THE MAN WITH THE FINE MIND

By KRIS NEVILLE

Recently newspapers have told of an unusual number of murders without motive. A teen-age girl is shot to death by a total stranger. A young man runs amok, butchering a dozen or more innocent bystanders. An expectant mother is blasted down on a busy street by a man she's never seen before. The police come and take the killer away and the men in the white coats rap his knees with rubber hammers and mutter something about "schizophrenia" and lock him up in a padded cell, and that's the last you hear of it.

Kris Neville, whose story, The Opal Necklace, in the first issue of FANTASTIC, *drew a great deal of praise, again takes you through the mystic mazes of the human mind, showing with amazing insight what goes on in the mind of a madman moments before his last hold on reason disappears.*

THIS being only the first drink, he was still tense and ill at ease, and the room and the people were still sharply in focus. He had no desire to scream at the discreet group of husbands surrounding Malvernen — an odd name for a woman, he thought detachedly — and call them the idiots they were. He had no desire to collar the first person that passed and cry: "Why don't you let me alone!" He had no intention of cussing out the hostess for inviting him. Things like that had not yet occurred to him.

The colors were unusually bright, and his ears picked up scraps of conversation even as he listened to Malvernen.

One would imagine, he thought, if one did not know her, that she

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was not flirting with the husbands, each in turn. That the smile was distant and impersonal and the attentive way she listened was merely polite.

Malvernen, talking now, had dreamed, she said, that it was necessary to prove she owned a butcher knife before she was permitted to buy groceries in the super market.

Looking at her sprawled over the purple chair, her white legs draped over the arm rest, some of the lower thigh of the right one, fringed by the green lace of her slip, showing seductively, he thought of frog legs on a wine-stained platter garnished with parsley. And thinking of frog legs, he thought especially of the way they kicked and quivered in the frying pan and seemed to quiver in the throat as they were being swallowed.

He rolled the warming brandy in the glass. He wanted to interrupt her monologue and explain the meaning of the dream, so that she might better understand herself and so that the company would realize the depth of his own insight and turn to listen to him as they were not listening to her.

It would, he thought, be pleasant to snub them then: to fade away, withdraw, ignore them, leave them to their own drab worlds, forever excluded from his own radiance.

He formed the sentences in his mind: It is because you are not married (he fancied himself saying as he leaned toward her) that you have such a dream. You see, the knife is the dream symbol for the male. . . .

At least, he thought, in her case. In such matters it is essential to consider the background of the subject. The knife, to someone else, might indicate a deep-seated complex, might represent a menace to his own masculinity. . . .

Without (he continued his fancied conversation) the husband which the knife represents, which I will be, you are unable to obtain the security of a home, represented by your act of purchasing for that home. You think the key to a man's love is through his stomach, you think if you could cook like mother. . .

But he said nothing. The company still listened to Malvernen. He squirmed on the sofa. He wanted to draw them away from her and leave her in a silence of inattention alien to her nature, from which she would burst, venting her wrath and affection upon him, her tormentor.

You came with me, Malvernen, he thought. You should pay some attention to the man you will marry. I'm very smart, I have a fine mind, everyone knows that. I can talk, too.

But he was too sober yet. Later, he would become almost garru-

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lous, but by then he would have lost the lucidity of the present moment. Things would begin to blur, and ideas so easily felt would be impossible to put into words; the words would come out all wrong.

He fell to reflecting how fortunate some people were — those who, in their supreme ignorance or peace of mind, were able to recount their dreams to others. There are some people, he thought, who never tell their dreams, who insist they never dream at all, thinking it better to be thought a liar than a monster.

I must not throw glasses tonight, he thought; or cry; nor must I curse again. The hangover will be sufficient punishment.

He chuckled to himself and noticed that one of the husbands turned to look at him suspiciously.

What an idiot! he thought.

They're all neurotic, of course, he thought. Only they have no insight.

Now you take me, he thought, I read quite a bit of psychology.

He drained his brandy glass and felt the fumes go to his brain.

Idly, he speculated that it would be nice to kill Malvernen; it would be most satisfying.

The husbands had drifted away, and Malvernen was alone. "Come over here and talk to me," she invited him.

Of course, there was nothing to do but obey her. But as a small gesture of defiance, he crossed the room first and poured himself another drink.

She has the marvelous ability to make a man feel impotent, he thought. She does this in defense of the hungry emotion she rouses; she has a father fixation complex, a strong one.

She's a clever devil, he thought. The rest of them think she's in love with me; but I'm not fooled. They never see the subtle rejections.

He came and sat down at her feet and looked up into her face.

They were alone in the study. Suddenly, for a moment, he felt very strange and divorced from himself.

"Don't get drunk," she said.

She knows the way to get me drunk is to tell me not to, he thought. She wants me drunk, because when I'm drunk I babble at her endlessly like a child crying in the night to his mother.

I have insight, he thought.

He drank the brandy. "I'll stay sober tonight," he said, already feeling himself a little drunk.

"I wish you didn't have to," she said.

"What did you say?" he said, shaking his head.

"I wish you'd told me, then, before we came. You won't mind if I stay, will you?"

"What are you talking about?" he said angrily.

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"Well, you'd better hurry," she said. "I'll tell the hostess that you had to run. Good-bye, dear. Be sure to phone me in the morning. Here, I'll go with you to get your coat."

"What are you talking about? I'm not going anywhere!"

Malvernen stood up and stepped over him. She walked toward the door, talking to him, her eyes on a spot slightly above her left shoulder, where his face might be, were he not sitting at the foot of the chair she had just left.

After a moment, he heard people in the den bidding him good-bye.

Sitting quietly on the floor, he thought of how beautiful the red lampshade was. They've gone crazy, he told himself, I'm sitting here on the floor looking at a beautiful red lampshade and they think they're talking to me in the front room.

"Good-bye," they said. There was laughter, a door opening and closing.

For a moment he could not force his mind to concentrate. I have a strong mind, he told himself. The tests at college proved that. I must keep a grip on it now.

And then he nodded his head and laughed deep in his throat.

It's Malvernen's doing, he thought. She arranged it like this; she must have talked to them and made them agree in advance. It's supposed to make me stop drinking.

Oh, it's very clever, he thought. She's a perfect little actress. You might have thought I really was walking at her side.

He stood up and poured himself a drink. He drank it and poured himself another one.

The party seemed to be moving into the living room. He could hear them leaving the den. He stood alone in the quiet study, smiling at the way parties migrate from room to room. Slowly the colors were beginning to lose some of their brilliance. Only the reds — the reds of the wallpaper, the lampshade, the book jackets, the pillows — were still sharp and clean. The distant conversation was a wordless hum punctuated now and again by laughter. Someone began to play the piano.

Drink in hand, he went to the door of the den. He stood there for a moment. As he started to cross the floor, a couple came in from the living room. They stepped around him as if they were aware of his presence, as if they felt he were there, but they did not look at him.

He stared after them. They stopped to embrace and clung tightly to each other.

They're trying to make it convincing, he thought. To hell with them. He finished the drink quickly and set the glass on an end table.

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Drawings: Heinrich Kley

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Smiling sourly, he went into the living room. No one turned to look at him. The colors were dull. The lights were fading. He lit a cigarette. Faces blurred and ran together, and his hands were heavy.

The man at the piano was wearing a red tie.

"Okay," he said. "The joke's over. I'm wise to it."

No one seemed to hear him.

The hostess, smiling sociably, a watered drink in her hand, was listening to Malvernen apologize for her fiancé.

He looked at the ring on her finger and for a moment could not remember giving it to her. I must remember to get it back, he thought. I made a horrible mistake. I must do it when I've been drinking, because otherwise she might talk me out of taking it back — no, it's the other way around, he thought: I must do it when I'm sober.

I don't think it's funny, he thought. She shouldn't have arranged this little game. That's a good excuse to get the ring back.

He shook his head and went to the man at the piano. He bent over and said, "Come on, let's cut out this damned nonsense! I know you can see me! Come on, now!"

The man did not turn or answer.

"God damn it!" he said, reaching out for the man's arm. "Enough is enough, do you hear me!" He took the arm, but his grasp was suddenly nerveless, and he could not even shake the arm. His hand lay upon it, feather light and powerless.

He stepped back, and one of the slightly drunk guests detoured around him without looking directly at him.

"He's getting to be a terrible drunk," the hostess said. "I hate to ask him to parties any more. No telling what he's liable to do. Over at the Johnsons' last week, he —"

He strained to listen, realizing that she was talking about him.

"I know," Malvernen said. "It's only been the last couple of months. He's been worried lately. But I can handle him when he gets drunk. He's like a baby."

He moved toward her. "God damn you," he said.

"He's had so much on his mind. His mother dying — he blames himself for not being there — he'll get over it. I'll stick by him."

"He frightens me," the hostess said. "The look in his eyes, sometimes, when he's been drinking."

"He's fine when he's sober," Malvernen said.

"Yes, when he's sober."

"He does those things he does when he gets drunk because he feels guilty — he wants us to punish him, to ostracize him, I think — I don't know. He needs sympathy."

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Sly, very sly, he thought. Malvernen knows I'm still here, she knows I'm listening.

I'll ignore her, he thought, that will be most effective.

He went to the bar and poured himself a drink. He drank it. He waved the bottle at a thin, mousey-looking girl. "You see this!" he cried. "See this, damn you!"

She stared through him, a blank expression on her face. She sipped her drink.

He put the bottle down. His hands were shaking. He closed his eyes tightly and shook his head. His hands began to feel lighter, floating, powerful.

He held his hands above his head. "Listen!" he cried. The piano player changed melodies. "I know what you sons of bitches are trying to do!" he cried.

Over in the corner, three people began laughing at a joke.

"Listen!" he pleaded. "Please listen to me."

"Would you hand me a cigarette?" the mousey little girl asked a man in a T-shirt.

He stood still, panting. There was perspiration in his palms and on his forehead. He hunched forward. "I'll show you!" he snarled. "I'll show you! I'll get drunk anyway, damn you!"

He fumbled for the bottle. He drank out of it. The room swam before his eyes when he set it down. He lurched back against a table.

He wrinkled his forehead, focusing his eyes. Slowly the room was getting fuzzy at the edges. Things moved like disembodied spirits in the outer darkness.

I'll show them, he thought. I'll make them notice me.

He staggered across the room. He propped himself up against the doorway. He stumbled down a dark hallway.

He rested against the stove in the kitchen. Moonlight came into the room from the east window and fell across the linoleum; everything was drab and colorless.

He fumbled at the handle of the butcher knife in the knife rack.

He carried the butcher knife into the living room. His feet were getting heavy now, but his hands were light.

He weaved across the room to the hostess. He waved the butcher knife in front of her face. She did not notice it.

"I could cut your throat!" he said.

The hostess moved leisurely toward a tight group of men who were examining one of the books on the lamp table.

He got a bottle and went to the corner and sat down and began to cry. After three drinks, his mind began to clear. The room was still blurred, but if he closed his eyes and leaned back, he could think

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in a quite satisfactory manner.

They don't see me, he thought.

It's Malvernen's fault, he thought.

They don't see me!

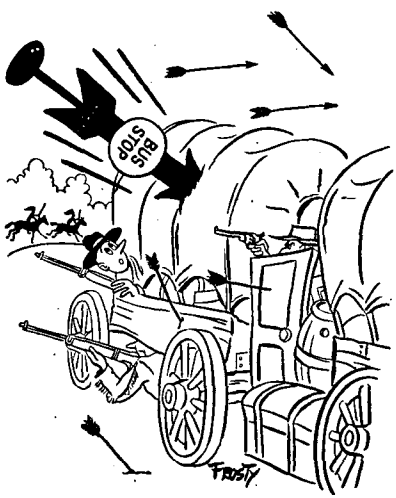
I have a very powerful mind, he thought. I could walk through walls if I only had the energy when I got drunk enough.

I'm asleep, I'm dreaming. Alcohol induces dreams. People move very slowly to the fox trot music from a piano with a red tie.

I have a powerful desire for the negation of my masculinity, he thought, pleased with the neatness of the sentence.

He repeated it aloud.

"You see," he explained, although no one listened to him, "I created an hallucination with my mind that walked out of the room, that you all said good-bye to, thinking all the time it was me."



He sat in the corner for what seemed a long time, petting the butcher knife, his eyes closed. Finally he heard Malvernen say, "I really have to go."

Her voice cut clearly across the rest of the conversation.

He opened his eyes and frowned. Maybe I've been listening for that, he thought. It would be nice to kill her, he thought. I've thought about it for a long time — for months.

Knowledge is power, he thought. I'm reasoning very clearly. The room is full of fog, but I can see what I want to see. I can see Malvernen. She is wearing a red tie. I understand myself.

I would have married her eventually, he thought. She would have got me drunk and trapped me. She has rejected me, but she would marry me for spite.

Mother, he thought, wouldn't like it, not at all. Poor mother fell and broke both legs, which interfered with her heart and killed her. I shouldn't have left the toy on the steps, but I'll make it up to her.

He smiled. My, I'm drunk, he thought, to be able to think so clearly. He sat in the corner of the room, petting his butcher knife.

I am so insignificant, he thought, that they can't even see me. When I am done, I will leave, and they

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will never even notice me at all.

He laughed aloud. I'm too smart for it, he thought. "I'm too smart for it," he said. "It's lying down there at the sleeping level of my mind, and I know it's there, and I can use it."

"I really must," Malvernen said. "No, thank you, Jack. After all, I'm engaged. I'll just call a cab."

He crept to his feet, clutching the butcher knife. "Wait!" he cried. "Malvernen, wait!" He brandished the butcher knife. "I want to kill you! Don't go away!"

He staggered after her, laughing.

She went into the bedroom after her coat, and he followed her, lurching and stumbling.

"I'm going to kill you, do you hear!"

No one turned to watch.

When he finished what he had to do, he swayed unsteadily.

I have done a bad thing, he thought. I will probably regret it when I sober up in the morning. I'll have a horrible hangover.

He picked up his coat from the bed. It had been lying beside Malvernen's. He put it on. I will leave now, and they won't even see me, he thought, chuckling drunkenly.

He put the butcher knife in his pocket.

At the doorway he stopped, trying to focus his eyes.

The hostess turned around, smiling. He could scarcely see her face. The smile merged and flowed away. "What are you doing back?" she said into an echo chamber. "I thought you left —"

She stopped talking.

Little by little the room fell silent as the guests all turned, horrified, to stare at him.

He looked down at his brightly colored hands and began to whimper.

SCIENCE is nothing but perception.
— Plato

WHEN you wish upon a star, don't get impatient if it seems a little slow to react. The nearest star to the Earth is 25,000,000,000,000 miles away.

IT seems that not all the atmospherical disturbances around Washington D. C. are caused by the hot air of the politicos after all. In 1908 a meteorite which weighed 40,000 tons crashed into a Siberian forest, and stirred up air waves that reached as far as our nation's capital.

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THE WORLD IS SO PEOPLE

BY DEAN EVANS

What do we want? Freedom from sickness, from hunger, from work, from war? Well, we're getting there. Every month or so science finds a new drug to whip an old disease, builds a new machine to tote that bale, or digs up a new synthetic food out of old inner tubes. War may be the last to go, since it will take a lot more than aureomycin to cure human nature.

Dean Evans contemplates this ultimate Utopia with jaundiced eye and tells you where the real danger lies, in this sardonic satire of a world in which man gets rid of everything that can possibly plague him . . . including, finally, man himself!

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THERE was no war! *War*. The very word was like something under glass in a museum, that people could wander in and take a look at and grin. Like that. A nasty, dried-up dead word.

There was no work! With the machines, work was unnecessary. The wonderful, wonderful, *wonderful* machines.

There was no disease! No sickness! Death, to be sure, but only old-age death. Not sick death.

There was no noise! (At least, not since Doctor Roodin's new Ordinance of Universal Silence, commonly referred to as USO.)

There was, indeed, nothing at all save for wonderful lazy-fat, lolly-gagging under the sun; that quiet-warmthed, tender-touching, zephyr-down cradle of the Enlightened Race.

Oh, there was *one* thing. Something amusing. An ancient saying Doctor Roodin had preserved for humor's sake. It went like this:

> "*Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field.*
> "*In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return unto the ground. . . .*"

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A quaint bit. Author unknown.

Ah, with Doctor Roodin at the thought-controls of the world, it was such a lovely place! If it only weren't for that young widow and her child out in the desert. She was the only one who couldn't see the light. That horrid, horrid woman!

Doctor Roodin's eyes swept the vast hall. He had hot-looking eyes, eyes with a burning message. Under his eyes were dark lines like purple half-moons. He was a tall, gaunt man, a man who leaned forward when he walked as though he were bucking a strong wind. He had long arms, long hands on the ends of those arms. At the moment he was dressed in black.

Doctor Roodin placed one of his long hands on the speaker's stand and opened thin lips. He said slowly, and in a voice that seemed to suck the very breath out of the listening crowd: "Earth is temptation."

He paused after that. A little time went by. Then he spoke again. "Have we come a long, long way?"

"*Have we come a long long way!*" It was an undulating answer from the massed human throats. They knew what he meant.

"I say this. We *have* come a long long way. And yet, Earth is temptation."

He stopped. The cameras moved in a little. He waited for them, blinking very slowly with his hot, dark eyes.

"Hear now. There was a promise made in the ancient days of long ago. There was a time and an hour given; and yet no man was to know that time nor that hour. No man!"

He paused again. He wiped his long hand over his thin lips. He waited. And when he continued he spoke even more slowly than before.

"Hear this," he said. "There were beasts on the face of the earth. The Brontosaurus. The Dinosaur. The Ichthyosaurus. Monsters of Creation. Who could kill these monsters? And yet, they have passed. They have fulfilled their time.

"And then came man. Cave man. Stone man. Bronze man. Brutes. What power, what force, could kill such as these? But they, too, have passed. They, too, have fulfilled their time.

"Lastly, we. I say *we*, for we here are in no way different from the earliest of us. We have fulfilled our time, but we have not passed. I say, we have *fulfilled our time!* There is nothing we have not done, have not seen, have not heard, have not thought. Is there anything new under the sun? Not, alas, any more."

He stopped once more. The cameras moved, adjusted. The gaunt man waited. The crowd

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was expectant, but quiet. A feather, falling, would have boomed like a cannon in that vast sea of silent, upturned faces.

Doctor Roodin spoke again. "There was a promise made in the ancient days that this day, too, would pass. The time was not known. The hour was not known. No man, it was said, could know the hour. Well, has it come? Have we not fulfilled our time?" His voice suddenly dropped to a whisper of a note. "I say, look about you. Weigh the planet if you seek the truth. And having weighed it, ask yourselves this question: how long then must we wait?

"While we stay there will yet be we. For no man on earth can stop begetting. Earth herself is the mother of temptation. Hearken now. I make this pronouncement unto you. We shall *not* sow forever. The time of fallow is now. How many billions of us have passed along this way? The Earth is heavy with the weight of the memory of man. I say unto you: The world itself is so very *people!*"

He stopped. He looked out one last time at the hushed crowd. Then he bowed slightly, wiped a long hand at his brow and stepped back from the speaker's stand. There was a deadly stillness out in the vast hall for a long long while. And then, and slowly, methodically, even politely, the massed crowd began to file out and away.

The Doctor had spoken. It was not a completely understood thing he had said. Conversely, it was not a thing to be concerned about. Did not the Doctor have the good of the world like a blanket around his heart?

Davey Harrington blinked his ten-year-old eyes at the television screen. He looked away from it, looked over at his mother. He started to smile and his smile seemed to have in it some of the young disgust which filled his small soul.

"The Doc is so very nuts!" he said.

Mirene's eyes flickered. She didn't smile. She wanted to. Lord, it was funny enough. She said, instead, and in a very serious voice: "Don't jest, Davey. There's nothing to jest about in what he said. He's insane, yes. But not funny insane."

Davey frowned. He didn't actually feel like smiling anyhow. There was something in his mother's voice that somehow made it an un-smiling matter.

"What did he mean?" he asked simply.

His mother did smile then. A nice, young-mother smile. "I'm not sure," she said. And then she got up and went across the room and ran a rumpling hand through her son's hair and gave him a play-

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ful shove. "Off to bed with you, young man. Somebody's got to irrigate the corn field tomorrow. I wonder who it could be?"

"Me, huh?" he said, and grinned. He raised his face and accepted the good-night kiss. And then he went out of the room. The closing of a door somewhere else in the house echoed his passing.

After that the woman sat down again and put her face in her cupped hands and stared at the blank, now-silent screen across the room. She looked as though she were brooding. In truth, she was.

Mirene and Ed had married when Ed was twenty and she just seventeen. It had been eleven years ago — and just at the time when Roodin's peculiar genius was being felt with a certain insidious delight all over the world. They'd gone on a desert honeymoon that lasted almost three months. It wasn't until they again returned to the city that the startling thing had made itself known to them. Doctor Roodin had taken over the world. Like that. Governments, tribes, everything. And at first his influence seemed a benign thing. He proposed, for example, simple leisure for the world. The days of work had been fulfilled, he said. Why, then, work?

Delightful!

Machines were designed and built. Then other machines were designed, built, for the taking care of the first machines. And then still others. It was like hiring a guard and then hiring another guard to watch the first guard; and then still a third to watch the second. Surprisingly, it had worked well. The machines tackled the two most important problems first — and solved them. They produced food in tremendous abundance. Next, they solved the problem of the world-wide distribution of that food on a strictly mechanical basis. No human labor was involved.

At that point a temporary halt was made in Doctor Roodin's world-plans while still newer machines (to replace the first machines as they should eventually wear out) were designed and built and then set in watchful waiting over the entire world.

But after that the plan had gone forward again. Disease was licked. Ah, there had been an ingenious thing! Rocket ships had been sent up and out of the atmosphere of the Earth. Once outside, they had set a course around the periphery of the world like tiny glinting stationary knives with the Earth a spinning apple being pared. An invisible screen was laid down as they hovered; a screen of certain isotopic substances which, being heavy, was subject to the pull of gravity. Hence, like an all-embracing cur-

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tain it fell earthward through the atmosphere, killing all disease as it came. When it settled at long last it was as though a mammoth sanitary spread — a very tablecloth of a thing — had dropped on the whirling globe. After that there was no disease ever.

Simply delightful!

Oh, there were luxuries! There were gleaming Mobile-Units-Think (a splendid new invention, it resembled in appearance the old-fashioned sedan) that ran on Mirror-Roads as smooth as the name they borrowed. Everybody had one — or several, since they were entirely free. Jewelry? What do you like? Emeralds? Rubies? Diamonds? Have a handful, they're small.

It followed — naturally — nobody spent the winters in the colder zones any more. There was no reason for it. And freeze your panties? Don't be absurd.

But before all this had entirely come about the insidious little something came creeping in. Ed had mentioned it one night. It was about at the time when the first machines were being completed. Ed had stared at Mirene over the supper table one night (Davey wasn't a member of the family yet — not quite yet, that is) and he'd said in a strangely frightened voice: "Hey, Baby, what's this all about? The machines, I mean. When they're all done and in operation — well, what then?"

And Mirene, knowing a little something of the way he felt, for she too had thought of it, had nevertheless laughed and said: "Leisure, Honey! Barrels and barrels of nice easy leisure. Praise the Lo'd!"

"Is that funny?" Ed's voice got sudden-sharp. And she had blinked in surprise at him as he got up and went over to the window and stared moodily out at the dying sun as it fell over the last of the mountains and went splashing down into the sea.

The next night he mentioned it again, but rather progressively this time. He said at once when he had come home from work: "I've been talking to a couple of guys. They feel like I do about it. And you know something? The Super of the plant was one of the guys. The big gear himself. He —"

"Hey!" Mirene had broken in, laughing. "What's it all about?"

"Why . . ." Ed had looked momentarily puzzled. And then not puzzled at all. "Oh! I was talking about last night, of course. What comes after the machines, remember?"

She had known then how close to his basic self this thing had been to him. And that had been the start. After that little groups had sprung up all over the world feeling as he did. Not condemning the machines; not condemning

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Doctor Roodin. Just not liking the ideas somehow, and being a little fearful of the future at the same time.

But the machines were put into operation. Food? How much can you eat? Free, that is. Clothing? All you want. Gratis, naturally. Housing? What kind of a place have you always longed for? And where would you want it located? Step right in, it's yours for the living.

Like that it had been.

And the little bands of wondering, thinking men grew thinner with each passing month. But Ed was still one of the few. He worried. Maybe he worried too much, Mirene thought.

Free this. Free that. Anything your little heart desires. Friend, just *think* on it, it's yours!

At about that time Doctor Roodin made one of his pronouncements. The libraries of the world were to be destroyed. Reason? It was simple. Libraries were archives. Archives were records preserved as evidence. *Sic:* the libraries must go, since any evidence amassed by a world as miserable as the world had assuredly been before Doctor Roodin had taken over would now be totally worthless. Even more, a shame slapped in the now-enlightened face of mankind.

Certain things were preserved, though. Some witty sayings by men who had lived way ahead of their time, for example. Some humorous bits. Some (pitifully few of these) profound thoughts of the ancient ones gone before. Bits.

A little later came the second pronouncement: the law must go. There was a howl over that one. Scared, they were, you see. The clergy — what there was left of it — chimed in here, too.

In place of the law, Doctor Roodin offered his famous Three Commandments:

1. Thou shalt have no superstition.
2. Thou shalt abhor the ancient things, clinging only to the new.
3. Thou shalt rest and enjoy thy days, since they are few at best.

There was a punishment for violators: *Shun-ment.*

The clergy screamed. For a while it looked as though something might come of it. But no. At about that time somebody high in ecclesiastical circles had opportunely come forward with the theory that Doctor Roodin was indeed the long-awaited Savior of Mankind. The *Modern Messiah.* Hallelujah! The idea caught on. After all, wasn't everything he had thus far proposed of benefit to mankind? Wasn't everything he had instituted been given in the spirit of

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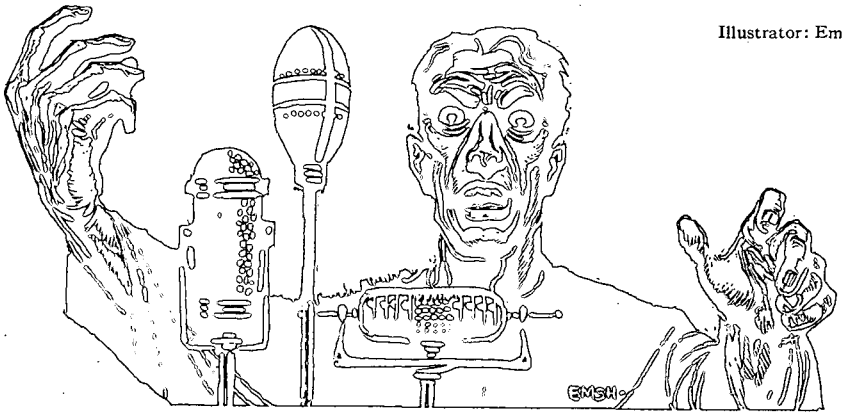

Illustrator: Emsh

love? Free? All right, a dictator if you must use the word. But what a dictator!

There was no war any more. War does not thrive in the face of international apathy. Besides, there has to be a reason for war. There were few murders, and those few grew less and less as weeks went on. How, indeed, could anybody be bothered with killing anybody else when everybody is so busy just having good, new-fashioned fun? Oh, all the old old sins fell by the wayside; no reason any more for them. Besides, once remove the stigma and what have you? No more sin. As simple as that.

Somewhere along the line little Davey had been born. And somewhere along the line Ed had broken one of the Commandments. Probably all of them. Sometimes Ed acted like a dog with a bone in its teeth. He was given shun-ment, of course. And here had been the point of decision for Mirene. She had looked forward to the bright new future of Doctor Roodin's world. Then she had looked backward at the bleak future of Ed's lifelong exile-to-be. She had sighed — but had chosen the latter. If you love a guy, there can't be any half-way about it. Little Davey, the baby, went along too. Poor little tot, people said.

Shun-ment in Ed's case meant exile on a ten-thousand-acre tract of sage-brush land in the most god-forsaken part of the old Nevada Territory. Nobody ever went there any more.

At first there were quite a few shun-ment cases. There were even a few who went into exile voluntarily. Thin numbers, these. The thinkers. But that didn't last long. Around that time came the su-

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perbly clever achievement of the no-disease. Doctor Roodin's followers were legion then. How can you hold out against a man who gives something like that to suffering humanity? The band of hold-outs waned, finally disappeared.

The final blow came when Doctor Roodin offered amnesty to the shun-ment cases. Ah, how could man have greater love for his fellow than that? Forgiveness and reinstatement among the happy, happy, resting peoples of the world. Who in their right senses would hesitate in the face of *that?*

Ed did.

By now it was a fetish with Ed. He snarled at the very mention of the good Doctor's name. And when the good doctor had even gone so far as to send an emissary, a fat and puffing, obviously overeating, over-relaxing, very ball of a man with the fresh green olive branch of friendship, Ed had promptly slapped the man silly. Not content with that, he kicked him bodily down the long and rocky terrace from their house to the Mirror-Road below. He had bundled him into the Mobile-Unit-Think which he came in and — since the fat man was quite dead by that time — Ed himself had done the necessary willing. He willed the car directly to Roodin's Headquarters, and as fast as it could go.

Mirene and Ed had worked hard after that. You have to work hard when you're scrounging a living off the desert. There were the cows, chickens, pigs. There were the vegetable gardens. There was the 'dobe cooler to be built in which potatoes, beets, turnips, squash and the like had to be stored. In all the world no one worked except Ed and Mirene. Mirene took it well. She loved her husband and was proud of him. Ed himself took it with the ferocity of a she-lion defending cubs. Under his lashing fist some of those barren acres were pummeled into fertility.

When little Davey was in his sixth year, Doctor Roodin got his patiently awaited revenge. It wasn't a good revenge. It wasn't the revenge of one man over another man. It was, instead, the revenge of a shrunken, embittered and quite nasty old woman.

It had come about in this way: Ed had been struck by a rattlesnake. And in this lovely, wonderful world where everything was free for the asking, Doctor Roodin had set a particularly impossible price on the serum which would have saved Ed's life. He demanded public apology. Mirene, wide-eyed, scared, had begged Ed to give in.

He said he'd die first.

In the manner of the proud, he did.

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The night of his burial, Mirene had taken crayon and in large letters had written across the living-room wall something that had stuck in her memory from her early childhood training. It wasn't much:

> *"There is an evil which I have seen under the sun . . . the fool foldeth his hands together and eateth his own flesh."*

From the old forgotten Bible, of course. In fact, two separate quotations, and both from Ecclesiastes. In this case they seemed to go together well.

Three times after that she had tried to kill him. She had gone down to his Headquarters with one of Ed's hunting knives concealed in her clothing. Three times she had failed. You can't kill a god. And Roodin was a god. Ask anybody.

And now this. Mirene lifted her head out of her hands and tried to recall his exact words. She couldn't; at least not all of them. But seven stood out like burning brands for anyone who would raise his eyes and look.

The time of the fallow is now!

Wearily, she went to bed. She was to find out soon what he had in mind.

It was about noon of a day two or three weeks later. Mirene was in the house at the moment. Little Davey was out in the east field on the tractor, guiding the gear-driven posthole digger. Doing the work of a man — and ten years old. Mirene had just come from the kitchen and glanced idly out the front window when she saw the first glimpse of it, a Mobile-Unit-Think coming down the road: the first to pass in months.

But it did not go by. It pulled up on the Mirror-Road directly in front of and below the house. A man got out, climbed slowly up the rock-laden high terrace. Mirene went to the door.

"You're not welcome here," she said coldly.

"Precisely!" The man was short. Short speech, short square face, short square body on short legs. "This is not a social call, Madam!"

In spite of her sudden anger Mirene felt like laughing. The man looked as though he felt this degrading thing happening to him was some punishment left over from a former incarnation. His tight mouth curled at one corner. His eyes flicked, darting, around the living room, saying things as they went. Critical things, judging things.

"Then you can turn around and get down the way you came up!" Mirene rapped it.

"Silence! This visit is official, Madam!" He gave her a look filled with a great deal of distaste, then took from his pocket a document and began to read.

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"Proclamation: On the Great Day of Universal Rest, it is decreed the inhabitants of this earth shall meet at appointed places, be identified, and transported to the rendezvous chosen. In your particular case . . ." he frowned slightly as if remembering ". . . that place will be a point north of here on the Mirror-Road exactly four hundred and fifteen miles distant. The Identity-Station will be set up and also the take-off field. Do I make myself clear?"

Mirene's face looked composed. "Is there reason behind this insanity?" she said quietly.

It didn't faze him. He said at once and quickly: "I have been instructed to inform you about what the rest of the entire world has already known and rejoiced over for the last two weeks. The world's inhabitants are to cease living, Madam! Simply and completely. Our Great Saint —"

"He's got that far, has he?"

The man never heard or, if he did, pretended he didn't. ". . . Our Great Saint has decreed thus. In preparation, great numbers of space-traveling ships have been designed and built. The population is to be transported en masse in these ships to a point in outer space not subject to the gravitational pull of the earth. There, we humans will sleep, awaiting the end of the fallow period."

He paused. He peered over at the woman as at a backward child. "Is this perfectly understood?"

Mirene didn't answer. She stared at him for one incredulous instant and then went out to the kitchen. When she returned she was carrying one of Ed's old deer rifles and it was pointed directly at the short, square man.

"The speed of a bullet is known," she said distinctly. "But unknown is the speed of your own two legs. Is *this* perfectly understood?"

The short man paled, but not for long. He went out of the house and down the rock-strewn terrace in slightly less than no time at all.

They sent a woman the next time. She came in the evening when Mirene and Davey were both home and in the living room together. The woman was a blonde like Mirene. She even looked a little like Mirene, same figure, same age: that brief period in a woman's life when at the approaches to the thirties she can be more desirable than at nineteen. There was one great difference between them, however. The visitor had a peculiar softness about her, and a strange, almost fanatical cast in her dark brown eyes.

"I hope we'll be friends," she said to Mirene.

Mirene didn't comment on that.

The woman said then, and very

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softly, almost kindly: "I hope I won't make the same mistake that was made before. I think you know I'm hoping that, Mrs. Harrington."

Mirene didn't answer that one either. She was a little too surprised to answer anything.

The woman smiled. "You don't know what it's like," she breathed. "You haven't any idea. Let me tell you, won't you?"

Mirene looked over at Davey. He was staring bug-eyed and a little suspiciously. They didn't have many guests, it was only natural he would react like that.

"All right," she said. "I'll listen, if that's what you want from me."

The woman nodded and smiled again. Her brown eyes seemed to become glowing things, things with a wonderful message the text of which the world has awaited far too long.

"He's a saint," she said. "If you knew him as I know him, you'd say that, too."

Mirene's lips began to curl. "We've had saints like him before. Lots of them. He did a very saintly act when he let my husband die."

"Your husband killed a man," the woman reminded gently. And then she abruptly went to Mirene and put a hand on Mirene's shoulder for an instant. "Forgive me," she said quickly. "That was cruel of me."

Mirene stared. "That's all right. Get on with it."

"There isn't much. It's just that Doctor Roodin is the most wonderful man who ever lived. He is the Christ and the Buddha and the Aton all rolled into one. He *loves* the world."

In a sense that was laughable, but somehow Mirene did not laugh. The strange conviction of this woman who looked so very much like herself was a disturbing thing. The woman continued to talk after a moment.

"He has done marvelous things for humanity, Mrs. Harrington. You know that, surely, no matter how you might feel personally about him. For some unaccountable reason your little family has chosen to remain aloof, but you must admit that nothing which he has done has been anything but good. He has given the world surcease from labor. From war. From hardship of any kind. From disease, even. He has torn the misery of the ages away from mankind's eyes. You know that."

"He's made a world of soft-living degenerates, that's what he's done!" Mirene said it sharply.

"Has he? Really, now? Has there been anything but happiness and contentment anywhere that you know of? You know I speak the truth. And now, the greatest boon of all is being offered, Mrs. Harrington. And that's what I'm

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here for. To explain it to you."

She stopped. She looked down at her hands which were now folded peacefully in her lap. Then she looked up at little Davey, who was staring bright-eyed at her. She smiled a friendly little smile at him.

She said, still looking at him but speaking to Mirene: "In the last book of the old Bible we were told there would someday be an end to this world, Mrs. Harrington. We, that is, Doctor Roodin and in fact all humanity, believe that prediction to be a true one. As we know, other species here on Earth have had their day. They came and they went. Man, Earth's greatest product, has a day as well. But, unfortunately, no one knows when that day will be. The day of our ending, I mean, of course. But we feel — and Our Saint has taught us this — that we have fulfilled our time. We have stayed here long enough. We have suffered long enough. We have waited and we have waited. There is no one who can tell how much longer we must yet wait. And for what, under these vaulting skies of heaven? If you look at it sensibly you must agree. What a pity to continue procreation! Alas, what a senseless, senseless thing! And that is why we are to call a halt to Nature's strange progression. If the heavens will not come to man — then man will go to the heavens. Our myriad little ships will be asteroids. Miniature planets. The highest attainment of the race of man will go to the skies and await the coming of the Day."

"*Dead.*" It was one bitter word clipped from Mirene's lips.

The woman waited. There was still that gentle smile on her face. When Roodin had sent her he had chosen well. Mirene took a long breath. She shook her head as if to clear it. Then she leaned forward and spoke quietly herself but with a terrible emphasis regardless.

"Very well. If you and the rest of the world will do this terrible obsessed thing, then do it and may God forgive the sadism of your leader. But there is one thing you seem to be completely overlooking. I am not one of your number. Neither is my child. We are *shun-ment* cases, remember?"

"By choice alone, Mrs. Harrington."

"By sane choice! And let me tell you something. I don't understand this attitude on the part of your — your Saint as you call him. We're *shun-ment*. Let him go if he wants to. Let the whole world go after him. But leave me alone, do you hear? Tell him I said that. Three simple words: leave me alone!"

Even then the woman's smile did not disappear. It altered somewhat, but still remained. She

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looked for a moment straight into the eyes of Mirene. For a moment. Then she turned her head and looked over at little Davey who, during all this, had not uttered a sound.

Still looking at him, she said in almost a whisper: "I'm very much afraid I have to remind you that will not be possible, Mrs. Harrington."

"What do you mean?" Mirene's eyes flew to Davey, flew back to the woman.

"Don't you know? Don't you really know?"

"Davey stays with me where he belongs!" Mirene yelled it.

"That is just the trouble, don't you see. We cannot allow that."

There wasn't anything else after that. The woman came over to Mirene, offered her hand. Mirene ignored it. The woman sighed, turned, smiled at Davey and went out of the house. And Davey was the first to break the long silence which followed.

"What did she mean, Mother?" he said.

But Mirene wasn't telling him that. Not yet. She wasn't admitting the meaning of the woman's words even to herself — just yet.

The Great Day of Universal Rest was on the first of September. You could be deaf, dumb and blind and yet know that. No effort was considered too great to acquaint the peoples — *all* of the peoples — all over the world.

The morning following the woman's visit Mirene had gone out and looked at the old brown hills to the west. They seemed far away. In the clear hard light of dawn they seemed very far away indeed. Sighing, she went in the house again and awakened Davey. And nearly all of that day they spent in moving food and clothing and a few cows away from the house. For the next several days they did this. Davey wanted to know why. Ten thousand times he wanted to know why. Mirene wouldn't tell him. On the sixth day they reached the hills with their burdens. The seventh Mirene spent studying them. On the eighth she found what she had hoped to find: an abandoned mine. It wasn't much, the wooden mine-face itself had rotted and half fallen away years before. But Mirene had smiled grimly when she came upon it. Together the two of them laboriously moved their small possessions down its slender shaft. After that they went back to the house.

On the fourth day before the Great Day, it began. Three Mobile-Units-Think came along the Mirror-Road. When they got to the house the occupants of the cars got out, started to come up the terrace. Mirene was prepared for them. She cut all three down with Ed's old rifle. Two men left behind in the cars returned the

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fire, but it was not effective. It's hard to hit a small target inside a house, and especially when you cannot see that target.

When Mirene's fourth shot nicked even one of those in the cars they sped, panic-stricken, down the long silvery Mirror-Road and away from the house.

Mirene and Davey didn't go near the three dead men. All the rest of that day they spent painting on the side of the house that faced the road this message in huge red letters:

COME AND GET US.
COME AND GET KILLED!

They did not accept the invitation.

In the black of the final night Mirene and little Davey set out for the old brown hills to the west. They had to walk seven hours to get to the abandoned mine shaft. Mirene bedded Davey down as comfortably as it was possible. She spent the remainder of the night herself at the mouth of the shaft. What was to come would come soon now.

It did. It came as dawn was breaking silver and cold from the east and the purple-red of the sun was trailing along reluctantly behind. It came in the form of wings. Mirene looked from her position at the mouth of the mine.

It wasn't a space-traveling ship. You don't have to be an aeronautical expert to tell the difference. It came low and thundering, as a bomber does. It came low and circling. It circled three times. And then it began to climb and go away at the same time. But it didn't stay away for long. It came back from the east as the light of dawn itself did. It came fast, it came high. As it approached it dropped what it had come to drop and Mirene threw herself face down on the hard earth away from it.

The atomic blast left nothing of the house, of course. Nor of the barns. Nor of the pastures, nor of the fences. Nor even of the fences little Davey had been putting up in the east field. Mirene was too far away to see it, but that mushrooming ball of a cloud told all she had to know.

It didn't stop the sun. Nothing man has invented can stop the sun. The sun came ponderously, its angry, purple-red light turning slowly brighter like a rheostat-controlled lamp under the steadily urging fingers of a god. Mirene got to her feet and leaned wearily against an old four-by-four of the rotted mine-face. She lifted her head and looked up into its warm but not yet blinding glow. Well, they were gone. By now they were all little asteroids. Miniature planets, as the blonde woman had said. They had gone out into space to stand on some distant corner of the sky like a man wait-

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ing for his wife; not knowing when she was coming but expecting hopefully she would.

Well, all right. That left a pretty large world for just two small people, didn't it? *And the meek shall inherit the earth.*

She didn't feel especially meek. She didn't feel anything. Not yet. It was much too soon for feelings.

She sighed, turned to the shaft and went down. She found little Davey lying, bundled up, in one of the lower levels where she had left him. But he wasn't asleep. Nobody could have slept after that ship came across the second time. His eyes stared, wide-open, up at Mirene.

"What was that noise, Mother?" he said in a small, trying-not-to-be-but-scared-anyhow voice.

Mirene forced a grin to show to him. "An atomic explosion," she said. "The last one on Earth for quite a little while, I imagine. Did you sleep all right?"

He nodded. Some of his scare dissolved under the warmth of her grin as scare always does when a mother is close by. He shoved the blankets partly away. Then he got up on one elbow.

"I've been wondering something, Mother," he said.

"You have? Tell me."

He nodded. "You remember that lady who came to visit us the day before — before . . ." He didn't finish it.

Mirene's grin slowly left her lips and eyes.

"What did she mean, Mother?" He looked up at her. There was a patiently waiting look in his eyes. An untroubled look. But then that changed and he blinked and suddenly looked anxious. "What are you crying for, Mother?" he asked.

The Mudslingers

Kley

All Heinrich Kley drawings from
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Illustrator: Paul Lundy

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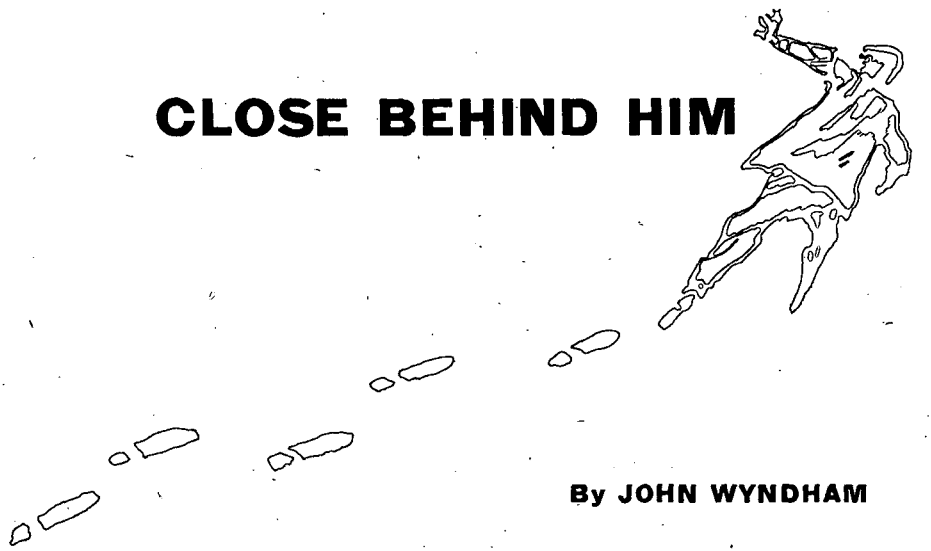
CLOSE BEHIND HIM



By JOHN WYNDHAM

It's probably true that dead men tell no tales. However, if you're looking for proof positive, don't bother to ask Spotty and Smudger, a pair of ex-burglars who dropped in at a gloomy old house one night to pick up a bit of swag. Seems they ran into an old coot with long teeth and no sense of humor, and were forced to do him, as the saying goes, in. Only then did the boys learn that great men aren't the only ones to leave their footprints in the sands of Time!

John Wyndham is the British author whose recent novel, Day of the Triffads, appeared first in Collier's, later as a best-selling pocket book. This time he has written one of the most curious horror yarns we've ever come across.

"You didn't ought to of croaked him," Smudger said resentfully. "What in hell did you want to do a fool thing like that for?"

Spotty turned to look at the house, a black spectre against the night sky. He shuddered.

"It was him or me," he muttered. "I wouldn't of done it if he didn't come for me — and I wouldn't even then, not if he'd come ordinary. . . ."

"What do you mean ordinary?"

"Like anybody else. But he was queer. . . . He wasn't —

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well, I guess he was crazy — dangerous crazy. . . ."

"All he needed was a tap to keep him quiet," Smudger persisted. "There wasn't no call to bash his loaf in."

"You didn't see him. I tell you, he didn't act human." Spotty shuddered again at the recollection, and bent down to rub the calf of his right leg tenderly.

The man had come into the room while Spotty was sifting rapidly through the contents of a desk. He'd made no sound. It had been just a feeling, a natural alertness, that had brought Spotty round to see him standing there. In that very first glimpse Spotty had felt there was something queer about him. The expression on his face — his attitude — they were wrong. In his biscuit-colored pajamas, he should have looked just an ordinary citizen awakened from sleep, too anxious to have delayed with dressing-gown and slippers. But some way he didn't. An ordinary citizen would have shown nervousness, at least wariness; he would most likely have picked up something to use as a weapon. This man stood crouching, arms a little raised, as though he were about to spring.

Moreover, any citizen whose lips curled back as this man's did to show his tongue licking hungrily between his teeth, should have been considered sufficiently unordinary to be locked away safely. In the course of his profession Spotty had developed reliable nerves, but the look of this man rocked them. Nobody should be pleased by the discovery of a burglar at large in his house. Yet, there could be no doubt that this victim was looking at Spotty with satisfaction. An unpleasant gloating kind of satisfaction, like that which might appear on a fox's face at the sight of a plump chicken. Spotty hadn't liked the look of him at all, so he had pulled out the convenient piece of pipe that he carried for emergencies.

Far from showing alarm, the man took a step closer. He poised, sprung on his toes like a wrestler.

"You keep off me, mate," said Spotty, holding up his nine inches of lead pipe as a warning.

Either the man did not hear — or the words held no interest for him. His long, bony face snarled. He shifted a little closer. Spotty backed against the edge of the desk. "I don't want no trouble. You just keep off me," he said again.

The man crouched a little lower. Spotty watched him through narrowed eyes. An extra tensing of the man's muscles gave him a fractional warning before the attack.

The man came without feinting or rushing: he simply sprang, like an animal.

In mid-leap he encountered

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Spotty's boot suddenly erected like a stanchion in his way. It took him in the middle and felled him. He sprawled on the floor doubled up, with one arm hugging his belly. The other hand threatened, with fingers bent into hooks. His head turned in jerks, his jaws with their curiously sharp teeth were apart, like a dog's about to snap.

Spotty knew just as well as Smudger that what was required was a quietening tap. He had been about to deliver it with professional skill and quality when the man, by an extraordinary wriggle, had succeeded in fastening his teeth into Spotty's leg. It was unexpected, excruciating enough to ruin Spotty's aim and make the blow ineffectual. So he had hit again; harder this time. Too hard. And even then he had more or less had to pry the man's teeth out of his leg. . . .

But it was not so much his aching leg — nor even the fact that he had killed the man — that was the chief cause of Spotty's concern. It was the kind of man he had killed.

"Like an animal he was," he said, and the recollection made him sweat. "Like a bloody wild animal. And the way he looked! His eyes! Christ, they wasn't human."

That aspect of the affair held little interest for Smudger. He'd not seen the man until he was already dead and looking like any other corpse. His present concern was that a mere matter of burglary had been abruptly transferred to the murder category — a class of work he had always kept clear of until now.

The job had looked easy enough. There shouldn't have been any trouble. A man living alone in a large house — a pretty queer customer with a pretty queer temper. On Fridays, Sundays, and sometimes on Wednesdays, there were meetings at which about twenty people came to the house and did not leave until the small hours of the following morning. All this information was according to Smudger's sister, who learned it third hand from the woman who cleaned the house. The woman was darkly speculative, but unspecific, about what went on at these gatherings. But from Smudger's point of view the important thing was that on other nights the man was alone in the house.

He seemed to be a dealer of some kind. People brought odd curios to the house to sell to him. Smudger had been greatly interested to hear that they were paid for — and paid for well — in cash. That was a solid, practical consideration. Beside it, the vaguely ill reputation of the place, the queerness of its furnishings, and the rumors of strange goings-on at the gatherings, were unim-

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portant. The only thing worthy of attention were the facts that the man lived alone and had items of value in his possession.

Smudger had thought of it as a one-man job at first, and with a little more information he might have tackled it on his own. He had discovered that there was a telephone, but no dog. He was fairly sure of the room in which the money must be kept, but unfortunately his sister's source of information had its limitations. He did not know whether there were burglar alarms or similar precautions, and he was too uncertain of the cleaning woman to attempt to get into the house by a subterfuge for a preliminary investigation. So he had taken Spotty in with him on a fifty-fifty basis.

The reluctance with which he had taken that step had now become an active regret — not only because Spotty had been foolish enough to kill the man, but because the way things had been he could easily have made a hundred per cent haul on his own — and not be fool enough to kill the man had he been detected.

The attaché case which he carried was now well-filled with bundles of notes, along with an assortment of precious-looking objects in gold and silver, probably eminently traceable, but useful if melted down. It was irritating to think that the whole load, instead of merely half of it, might have been his.

The two men stood quietly in the bushes for some minutes and listened. Satisfied, they pushed through a hole in the hedge, then moved cautiously down the length of the neighboring field in its shadow.

Spotty's chief sensation was relief at being out of the house. He hadn't liked the place from the moment they had entered. For one thing, the furnishings weren't like those he was used to. Unpleasant idols or carved figures of some kind stood about in unexpected places, looming suddenly out of the darkness into his flashlight's beam with hideous expressions on their faces. There were pictures and pieces of tapestry that were macabre and shocking to a simple burglar. Spotty was not particularly sensitive, but these seemed to him highly unsuitable to have about the home.

The same quality extended to more practical objects. The legs of a large oak table had been carved into mythical miscegenates of repulsive appearance. The two bowls which stood upon the table were either genuine or extremely good representations of polished human skulls. Spotty could not imagine why, in one room, anybody should want to mount a crucifix on the wall upside down and place on a shelf beneath it a

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row of sconces holding nine black candles — then flank the whole with two pictures of an indecency so revolting it almost took his breath away. All these things had somehow combined to rattle his usual hard-headedness.

But even though he was out of the place now, he didn't feel quite free of its influence. He decided he wouldn't feel properly himself again until they were in the car and several miles away.

After working around two fields they came to the dusty white lane off which they had parked the car. They prospected carefully. By now the sky had cleared of clouds and the moonlight showed the road empty in both directions. Spotty scrambled through the hedge, across the ditch, and stood on the road in a quietness broken only by Smudger's progress through the hedge. Then he started to walk towards the car.

He had gone about a dozen paces when Smudger's voice stopped him. "Hey, Spotty. What've you got on your feet?"

Spotty stopped and looked down. There was nothing remarkable about his feet; his boots looked just as they had always looked.

"What —?" he began.

"No! Behind you!"

Spotty looked back. From the point where he had stepped on to the road to another some five feet behind where he now stood was a series of footprints, dark in the white dust. He lifted his foot and examined the sole of his boot; the dust was clinging to it. He turned his eyes back to the footmarks once more. They looked black, and seemed to glisten.

Smudger bent down to peer more closely. When he looked up again there was a bewildered expression on his face. He gazed at Spotty's boots, and then back to the glistening marks. The prints of bare feet . . .

"There's something funny going on here," he said inadequately.

Spotty, looking back over his shoulder, took another step forward. Five feet behind him a new mark of a bare foot appeared from nowhere.

A watery feeling swept over Spotty. He took another experimental step. As mysteriously as before, another footmark appeared. He turned widened eyes on Smudger. Smudger looked back at him. Neither said anything for a moment. Then Smudger bent down, touched one of the marks with his finger, then shone his flashlight on the finger.

"Red," he said. "Like blood . . ."

The words broke the trance that had settled on Spotty. Panic seized him. He stared around wildly, then began to run. After

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him followed the footprints. Smudger ran too. He noticed that the marks were no longer the prints of a full foot but only its forepart, as if whatever made them were also running.

Spotty was frightened, but not badly enough to forget the turn where they had parked the car beneath some trees. He made for it, and clambered in. Smudger, breathing heavily, got in on the other side and dropped the attaché case in the back.

"Going to get out of this lot quick," Spotty said, pressing the starter.

"Take it easy," advised Smudger. "We got to think."

But Spotty was in no thinking mood. He got into gear, jolted out of hiding, and turned down the lane.

A mile or so farther on Smudger turned back from craning out of the window.

"Not a sign," he said, relieved. "Reckon we've ditched it — whatever it was." He thought for some moments, then he said: "Look here, if those marks were behind us all the way from the house, they'll be able to follow them by daylight to where we parked the car."

"They'd've found the car marks anyway," Spotty replied.

"But what if they're *still* following?" Smudger suggested.

"You just said they weren't."

"Maybe they couldn't keep up with us. But suppose they're coming along somewhere behind us, leaving a trail?"

Spotty had greatly recovered, he was almost his old practical self again. He stopped the car. "All right. We'll see," he said grimly. "And if they are — what then?"

He lit a cigarette with a hand that was almost steady. Then he leaned out of the car, studying the road behind them. The moonlight was strong enough to show up any dark marks.

"What do you reckon it was?" he said, over his shoulder. "We can't both've been seeing things."

"They were real enough." Smudger looked at the stain still on his finger.

On a sudden idea, Spotty pulled up his right trouser leg. The marks of the teeth were there, and there was a little blood, too, soaked into his sock, but he couldn't make that account for anything.

The minutes passed. Still there was no manifestation of footprints. Smudger got out and walked a few yards back along the road to make sure. After a moment's hesitation Spotty followed him.

"Not a sign," Smudger said. "I reckon — hey!" He broke off, looking beyond Spotty.

Spotty turned around. Behind him was a trail of dark, naked

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footprints leading *from* the car.

Spotty stared. He walked back to the car; the footmarks followed. It was a chastened Spotty who sat down in the car.

"Well?"

Smudger had nothing to offer. Smudger, in fact, was considerably confused. Several aspects of the situation were competing for his attention. The footsteps were not following *him*, so he found himself less afraid of them than of their possible consequences. They were laying a noticeable trail for anyone to follow to Spotty, and the trouble was that the trail would lead to him, too, if he and Spotty kept together.

The immediate solution that occurred to him was that they split up, and Spotty take care of his own troubles. The best way would be to divide the haul right here and now. If Spotty could succeed in shaking off the footprints, good for him. After all, the killing was none of Smudger's affair.

He was about to make the suggestion when another aspect occurred to him. If Spotty were picked up with part of the stuff on him, the case would be clinched. It was also possible that Spotty, in a bad jam with nothing to lose, might spill. A far safer way would be for him to hold the stuff. Then Spotty could come for his share when, and if, he succeeded in losing the telltale prints.

It was obviously the only safe and reasonable course. The trouble was that Spotty, when it was suggested to him, did not see it that way.

They drove a few more miles, each occupied with his own thoughts. In a quiet lane they stopped once more. Again Spotty got out of the car and walked a few yards away from it. The moon was lower, but it still gave enough light to show the footprints following him. He came back looking more worried than frightened. Smudger decided to cut a possible loss and go back to his former plan.

"Look here," he suggested, "what say we share out the takings now, and you drop me off a bit up the road?"

Spotty looked doubtful, but Smudger pressed: "If you can shake that trail off, well and good. If you can't — well, there's no sense in us both getting pinched, is there? Anyway, it was you as croaked him. And one has a better chance of getting away than two."

Spotty was still not keen, but he had no alternative to offer.

Smudger pulled the attaché case out of the back and opened it between them. Spotty began to separate the bundles of notes into two piles. It had been a good haul. As Smudger watched, he felt a great sadness that half of it was going to benefit nobody when Spotty was picked up. Sheer

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waste, it seemed to him.

Spotty, with his head bent over his work, did not notice Smudger draw the piece of lead pipe out of his pocket. Smudger brought it down on the back of his head with such force and neatness that it is doubtful whether Spotty ever knew anything about it.

Smudger stopped the car at the next bridge and pushed Spotty's body over the low wall. He watched as the ripples widened out across the canal below. Then he drove on.

It was three days later that Smudger got home. He arrived in the kitchen soaked to the skin, and clutching his attaché case. He was looking worn, white, and ready to drop. He dragged a chair away from the table and slumped into it.

"Bill!" his wife whispered. "What is it? Are they after you?"

"No, Liz — at least, it ain't the cops. But something is."

He pointed to a mark close inside the door. At first she thought it was his own wet footprint.

"Get a wet cloth, Liz, and clean up the front step and the passage before anyone sees it," he said.

She hesitated, puzzled.

"For God's sake, do it quick, Liz," he urged her.

Still half bewildered, she went through the dark passage and opened the door. The rain was pelting down, seeming to bounce up from the road as it hit. The gutters were running like torrents. Everything streamed with wetness save the doorstep protected by the small jutting porch. And on the step was the blood-red print of a naked foot. . . .

In a kind of trance she went down on her knees and swabbed it clean with the wet cloth. Closing the door, she switched on the lights and saw the prints leading towards the kitchen. When she had cleaned them up, she went back to her husband.

"You been hit, Bill?"

He looked at her, elbows on the table, his head supported between his hands.

"No," he said. "It ain't me what's making them marks, Liz — it's what's followin' me."

"Following you? You mean they been following you all the way from the job?" she said incredulously. "How did you get back?"

Smudger explained. His immediate anxiety, after pitching Spotty into the canal, had been to rid himself of the car. It had been a pinch for the job, and the number and description would have been circulated. He had parked it in a quiet spot and gotten out to walk, maybe pick up a lift. When he had gone a few yards he had looked back and seen the line of prints behind him. They had frightened him a good deal

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more than he now admitted. Until that moment he had assumed that since they had been following Spotty they would have followed him into the canal. Now, it seemed, they had transferred their attentions to himself. He tried a few more steps: they followed. With a great effort he got a grip on himself, and refrained from running. He perceived that unless he wanted to leave a clear trail he must go back to the car. He did.

Farther on he tried again, and with a sinking, hopeless feeling observed the same result. Back in the car, he lit a cigarette and considered plans with as much calmness as he could collect.

The thing to do was to find something that would not show tracks — or would not hold them. A flash of inspiration came to him, and he headed the car towards the river.

The sky was barely gray yet. He fancied that he managed to get the car down to the towpath without being seen. At any rate, no one had hailed him as he cut through the long grass to the water's edge. From there he had made his way downstream, plodding along through a few inches of water until he found a rowboat. It was a venerable and decrepit affair, but it served his purpose.

From then on his journey had been unexciting, but also uncomfortable. During the day he had become extremely hungry, but he did not dare to leave the boat until after dark, and then he moved only in the darkest streets where the marks might not be seen. Both that day and the next two he had spent hoping for rain. This morning, in a drenching downpour that looked like it might continue for hours, he had sunk the boat and made his way home, trusting that the trail would be washed away. As far as he knew, it had been.

Liz was less impressed than she ought to have been.

"I reckon it must be something on your boots," she said practically. "Why didn't you buy some new ones?"

He looked at her with a dull resentment. "It ain't nothing on my boots," he said. "Didn't I tell you it was following me? You seen the marks. How could they come off my boots? Use your head."

"But it don't make sense. Not the way you say it. *What's* following you?"

"How do I know?" he said bitterly. "All I know is that it makes them marks — and they're getting closer, too."

"How do you mean closer?"

"Just what I say. The first day they was about five feet behind me. Now they're between three and four."

It was not the kind of thing

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that Liz could take in too easily.

"It don't make sense," she repeated.

It made no more sense during the days that followed, but she ceased to doubt. Smudger stayed in the house; whatever was following stayed with him. The marks of it were everywhere: on the stairs, upstairs, downstairs. Half Liz's time was spent in cleaning them up lest someone should come in and see them. They got on her nerves. But not as badly as they got on Smudger's. . . .

Even Liz could not deny that the feet were stepping a little more closely behind him — a little more closely each day.

"And what happens when they catch up?" Smudger demanded fearfully. "Tell me that. What can I do? What the hell can I do?"

But Liz had no suggestions. Nor was there anyone else they dared ask about it.

Smudger began to dream nights. He'd whimper and she'd wake him up asking what was the matter. The first time he could not remember, but the dream was repeated, growing a little clearer with each recurrence. A black shape appeared to hang over him as he lay. It was vaguely manlike in form, but it hovered in the air as if suspended. Gradually it sank lower and lower until it rested upon him — but weightlessly, like a pattern of fog. It seemed to flow up towards his head, and he was in panic lest it should cover his face and smother him, but at his throat it stopped. There was a prickling at the side of his neck. He felt strangely weak, as though tiredness suddenly invaded him. At the same time the shadow appeared to grow denser. He could feel, too, that there began to be some weight in it as it lay upon him. Then, mercifully, Liz would wake him.

So real was the sensation that he inspected his neck carefully in the mirror when he shaved. But there was no mark there.

Gradually the glistening red prints closed in behind him. A foot behind his heels, six inches, three inches. . . .

Then came a morning when he woke tired and listless. He had to force himself to get up, and when he looked in the mirror, there *was* a mark on his throat. He called Liz, in a panic. But it was only a very small mark, and she made nothing of it.

But the next morning his lassitude was greater. It needed all his will-power to drag himself up. The pallor of his face shocked Liz — and himself, too, when he saw it in the shaving mirror. The red mark on his neck stood out more vividly. . . .

The next day he did not get up.

Two days later Liz became frightened enough to call in the

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doctor. It was a confession of desperation. Neither of them cared for the doctor, who knew or guessed uncomfortably much about the occupations of his patients. One called a doctor for remedies, not for homilies on one's way of life.

He came, he hummed, he ha'ed. He prescribed a tonic, and had a talk with Liz.

"He's seriously anaemic," he said. "But there's more to it than that. Something on his mind." He looked at her. "Have you any idea what it is?"

Liz's denial was unconvincing. He did not even pretend to believe it.

"I'm no magician," he said. "If you don't help me, I can't help him. Some kinds of worry can go on pressing and nagging like an abscess."

Liz continued to deny. For a moment she had been tempted to tell about the footmarks, but caution warned her that once she began she would likely be trapped into saying more than was healthy.

"Think it over," the doctor advised. "And let me know tomorrow how he is."

The next morning there was no doubt that Smudger was doing very badly. The tonic had done him no good at all. He lay in bed with his eyes, when they were open, looking unnaturally large in a drawn white face. He was so weak that she had to feed him with a spoon. He was frightened, too, that he was going to die. So was Liz. The alarm in her voice when she telephoned the doctor was unmistakably genuine.

"All right, I'll be round within an hour," he told her. "Have you found out what's on his mind yet?" he added.

"N-no," Liz told him.

When he came he told her to stay downstairs while he went up to see the patient. It seemed to her that an intolerably long time passed before she heard his feet on the stairs and she went out to meet him in the hall. She looked up into his face with mute anxiety. His expression was serious, and puzzled, so that she was afraid to hear him speak.

But at last she asked: "Is — is he going to die, Doctor?"

"He's very weak — very weak indeed," the doctor said. After a pause, he added: "Why didn't you tell me about those footprints he thought were following him?"

She looked up at him in alarm.

"It's all right. He's told me all about it now. I knew there was something on his mind. It's not very surprising, either."

Liz stared at him. "Not —?"

"In the circumstances, no," the doctor said. "A mind oppressed by a sense of sin can play a lot of nasty tricks. Nowadays

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SATAN SENDS FLOWERS

By HENRY KUTTNER

"Ladeez an' gennulmen: in this corner, wearing red trunks and weighing one billion years, the champion of Evil, his Satanic majesty, Lucifer. . . . And in the far corner, wearing a Brooks Brothers suit and Countess Mara tie, the underdog challenger, James Fenwick. The purse: one human soul!"

An old, old battle — one which has fascinated every writer from the monk and his parchment scroll to the young man next door with his electric typewriter. And whether the odds are set by the pulpit or the corner bookie, the final outcome is forever in doubt!

THE devil smiled uneasily at James Fenwick. "It's very irregular," he said. "I'm not sure—"

"Do you want my soul or not?" James Fenwick demanded.

"Naturally I do," the devil said. "But I'll have to think this over. Under the circumstances, I don't see how I could collect."

"All I want is immortality," Fenwick said with a pleased smile. "I wonder why no one has ever

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thought of this before. In my opinion it's foolproof. Come, do you want to back out?"

"Oh no," the devil said hastily. "It's just that — look here, Fenwick. I'm not sure you realize — immortality's a long time, you know."

"Exactly. The question is, will it ever have an end. If it does, you collect my soul. If not —" Fenwick made an airy gesture. "*I* win," he said.

"Oh, it has an end," the devil said, somewhat grimly. "It's just that right now I'd rather not undertake such a long-term investment. You wouldn't care for immortality, Fenwick. Believe me."

Fenwick said, "Ha."

"I don't see why you're so set on immortality," the devil said a little peevishly, tapping the point of his tail on the carpet.

"I'm not," Fenwick told him. "Actually, it's just a by-product. There happen to be quite a number of things I'd like to do without suffering the consequences, but —"

"I could promise you that," the devil put in eagerly.

"But," Fenwick said, lifting his hand for quiet, "the deal would obviously end right there. Played this way, I get not only an unlimited supply of immunities of all kinds, but I get immortality besides. Take it or leave it, my friend."

The devil rose from his chair and began to pace up and down the room, scowling at the carpet. Finally he looked up. "Very well," he said briskly. "I accept."

"You do?" Fenwick was aware of a slight sinking feeling. Now that it actually came to the point, maybe . . . He looked uneasily toward the drawn blinds of his apartment. "How will you go about it?" he asked.

"Biochemically," the devil said. Now that he had made up his mind, he seemed quite confident. "And with quantum mechanics. Aside from the internal regenerative functions, some space-time alterations will have to be made. You'll become independent of your external environment. Environment is often fatal."

"I'll stay right here, though? Visible, tangible — no tricks?"

"Tricks?" The devil looked wounded. "If there's any trickery, it seems to me you're the offender. No indeed, Fenwick. You'll get value received for your investment. I promise that. You'll become a closed system, like Achilles. Except for the heel. There will have to be a vulnerable point, you see."

"No," Fenwick said quickly. "I won't accept that."

"It can't be helped, I'm afraid. You'll be quite safe inside the closed system from anything outside. And there'll be nothing inside except you. It *is* you. In a way this is in your own interest." The devil's tail lashed upon the carpet.

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Fenwick regarded it uneasily. "If you wish to put an end to your own life eventually," the devil went on, "I can't protect you against that. Consider, however, that in a few million years you may wish to die."

"That reminds me," Fenwick said. "Tithonus. I'll keep my youth, health, present appearance, all my faculties —"

"Naturally, naturally. I'm not interested in tricking you over terms. What I had in mind was the possibility that boredom might set in."

"Are you bored?"

"I have been, in my time," the devil admitted.

"You're immortal?"

"Of course."

"Then why haven't you killed yourself? Or couldn't you?"

"I could," the devil said bleakly. "I did. . . . Now, the terms of our contract. Immortality, youth, health, etc., etc., invulnerability with the single exception of suicide. In return for this service, I shall possess your soul at death."

"Why?" Fenwick asked with sudden curiosity.

The devil looked at him somberly. "In your fall, and in the fall of every soul, I forget my own for a moment." He made an impatient gesture. "This is quibbling. Here." He plucked out of empty air a parchment scroll and a quill pen.

"Our agreement," the devil said.

Fenwick read the scroll carefully. At one point he looked up.

"What's this?" he asked. "I didn't know I was supposed to put up surety."

"I will naturally want some kind of bond," the devil said. "Unless you can find a co-guarantor?"

"I'm sure I couldn't," Fenwick said. "Not even in the death house. Well, what kind of security do you want?"

"Certain of your memories of the past," the devil said. "All of them unconscious, as it happens."

Fenwick considered. "I'm thinking about amnesia. I need my memories."

"Not these. Amnesia is concerned with conscious memories. You will never know the structure I want is missing."

"Is it — the soul?"

"No," the devil said calmly. "It is a necessary part of the soul, of course, or it would be of no value to me. But you will keep the essentials until you choose to surrender them to me at death. I will then combine the two and take possession of your soul. But that will no doubt be a long time from now, and in the meantime you will suffer no inconvenience."

"If I write that into the contract, will you sign?"

The devil nodded.

Fenwick scribbled in the margin and then signed his name with the

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wet red point of the quill. "Here, he said.

The devil, with a tolerant air, added his name. He then waved the scroll into emptiness.

"Very well," he said. "Now stand up, please. Some glandular readjustment is necessary." His hands sank into Fenwick's breast painlessly, and moved swiftly here and there. "The thyroid . . . and the other endocrines . . . can be reset to regenerate your body indefinitely. Turn around, please."

In the mirror over the fireplace Fenwick saw his red visitor's hand sink softly into the back of Fenwick's head. He felt a sudden dizziness.

"Thalamus and pineal," the devil murmured. "The space-time cognition is subjective . . . and now you're independent of your external environment. One moment, now. There's another slight . . ."

His wrist twisted suddenly and he drew his closed hand out of Fenwick's head. At the same time Fenwick felt a strange, sudden elation.

"What did you do then?" he asked, turning.

No one stood behind him. The apartment was quite empty. The devil had disappeared.

It could, of course, have been a dream. Fenwick had anticipated this possible skepticism after the event. Hallucinations could occur. He thought he was immortal and invulnerable now. But this is, by common standards, a psychotic delusion. He had no proof.

But he had no doubt, either. Immortality, he thought, is something tangible. An inward feeling of infinite well-being. That glandular readjustment, he thought. My body is functioning now as it never did before, as no one's ever did. I am a self-regenerating, closed system which nothing can injure, not even time.

A curious, welling happiness possessed him. He closed his eyes and summoned up the oldest memories he could command. Sunlight on a porch floor, the buzzing of a fly, warmth and a rocking motion. He was aware of no lack. His mind ranged freely in the past. The rhythmic sway and creak of swings in a playground, the echoing stillness of a church. A piano-box club-house. The roughness of a washcloth scrubbing his face, and his mother's voice. . . .

Invulnerable, immortal, Fenwick crossed the room, opened a door and went down a short hallway. He walked with a sense of wonderful lightness, of pure pleasure in being alive. He opened a second door quietly and looked in. His mother lay in bed asleep, propped on a heap of pillows.

Fenwick felt very happy.

He moved softly forward, skirting the wheel-chair by the bed, and stood looking down. Then he

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tugged a pillow gently free and lifted it in both hands, to lower it again, slowly at first, toward his mother's face.

Since this is not the chronicle of James Fenwick's sins, it is clearly not necessary to detail the steps by which he arrived, within five years, at the title of the Worst Man in the World. Sensational newspapers revelled in him. There were, of course, worse men, but being mortal and vulnerable they were more reticent.

Fenwick's behavior was based on an increasing feeling that he was the only permanent object in a transient world. "Their days are as grass," he mused, watching his fellow Satanists as they crowded around an altar with something unpleasant on it. This was early in his career, when he was exploring pure sensation along traditional lines, later discarded as juvenilia.

Meanwhile, perfectly free, and filled with that enduring, delightful sense of well-being, Fenwick experimented with many aspects of living. He left a trail of hung juries and baffled attorneys behind him. "A modern Caligula!" said the *New York News*, explaining to its readers who Caligula had been, with examples. "Are the shocking charges against James Fenwick true?"

But somehow, he could never quite be convicted. Every charge fell through. He was, as the devil had assured him, a closed system within his environment, and his independence of the outer world was demonstrated in many a courtroom. Exactly how the devil managed things so efficiently Fenwick could never understand. Very seldom did an actual miracle have to happen.

Once an investment banker, correctly blaming Fenwick for the collapse of his entire fortune, fired five bullets at Fenwick's heart. The bullets ricocheted. The only witnesses were the banker and Fenwick. Theorizing that his unharmed target was wearing a bullet-proof vest, the banker aimed the last bullet at Fenwick's head, with identical results. Later the man tried again, with a knife. Fenwick, who was curious, decided to wait and see what would happen. What happened was that eventually the banker went mad.

Fenwick, who had appropriated his fortune by very direct means, proceeded to increase it. Somehow, he was never convicted of any of the capital charges he incurred. It took a certain technique to make sure that the crimes he committed would always endanger his life if he were arrested for them, but he mastered the method without much difficulty and his wealth and power increased tremendously.

He was certainly notorious. Presently he decided that some-

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thing was lacking, and began to crave admiration. It was not so easy to achieve. He did not yet possess enough wealth to transcend the moral judgments of society. That was easily remedied. Ten years after his bargain with the devil, Fenwick was not perhaps the most powerful man in the world, but certainly the most powerful man in the United States. He attained the admiration and the fame he thought he wanted.

And it was not enough. The devil had suggested that in a few million years Fenwick might wish to die, out of sheer boredom. It took only ten years for Fenwick to realize, one summer day, with a little shock of unpleasant surprise, that he did not know what he wanted to do next.

He examined his state of mind with close attention. "Is this boredom?" he asked himself. If so, not even boredom was unpleasant. There was a delightful, sensuous relaxation about it, like floating in a warm summer ocean. In a sense, he was *too* relaxed.

"If this is all there is to immortality," he told himself, "I might as well not have bothered. Pleasant, certainly, but not worth bartering my soul for. There must be things that will rouse me out of this somnolence."

He experimented. The next five years witnessed his meteoric fall from public favor as he tried more and more frantically to break through that placid calm. He couldn't do it. He got no reaction from even the most horrific situations. What others saw with shock and often with horror had no meaning to Fenwick.

With a sense of smothered desperation under the calm, he saw that he was beginning to lose contact with the race of man. Humans were mortal, and more and more they seemed to recede into a distance less real than the solid earth underfoot. In time, he thought, the earth itself would become less solid, as he watched the slow shifting of the geologic tides.

He turned at last to the realm of the intellect. He took up painting and he dabbled in literature and in some of the sciences. Interesting — up to a point. But always he came before long to a closed door in the mind, beyond which lay only that floating calm which dissolved all interest out of his mind. Something was lacking in him. . . .

The suspicion was slow in forming. It floated almost to the surface and then sank again under the pressure of new experiments. But eventually it broke free into the realm of the conscious.

Early one summer morning Fenwick roused out of a sound sleep and sat straight up in bed as if an invisible hand had pulled him out of slumber.

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"Something is missing!" he told himself with great conviction. "But what?" He meditated. "How long has it been gone?" He could not say — at first. The deep, ineradicable calm kept lulling him and it was hard to follow the thought. That calm in itself was part of the trouble. How long had he had it? Obviously, since the day of his pact. What caused it? Well, he had been assuming all these many years that it was simply the physical well-being of perfectly and eternally functioning bodily mechanisms. But what if this were really something more? What if it were an artificially induced dulling of the mind, so that he would not suspect a theft had been committed?

A theft? Sitting up in bed among heavy silk sheets, with the June dawn pale outside the windows, James Fenwick suddenly saw the outrageous truth. He struck his knee a resounding blow under the bedclothes.

"My soul!" he cried to the unheeding dawn. "He swindled me! He stole my soul!"

The moment the idea took shape it seemed so obvious Fenwick could not understand why it had not been clear from the first. The devil had cunningly and most unfairly anticipated the payoff by seizing his soul too soon. And if not all of it, then the most important part. Fenwick had actually stood before the mirror and watched him do it. The proof seemed obvious. Something was very definitely missing. He seemed to stand always just inside a closed door in the mind that would not open for him because he lacked the essential something, the lost, the stolen soul. . . .

What good was immortality without this mysterious something that gave immortality its savor? He was helpless to enjoy the full potentialities of eternal life because he had been robbed of the very key to living.

"'Certain memories of the past', is it?" he sneered, remembering the devil's casual description of the thing he wanted for surety. "Never miss them, eh? And all the time it was something out of the very middle of my soul!"

Now he remembered episodes out of folklore and mythology, people in legend who had lacked souls. The Little Mermaid, the Seal Maiden, someone or other in *Midsummer Night's Dream* — a standard situation in myth, once you considered the question. And those who lacked the souls always yearned to get one at any cost. Nor was it, Fenwick realized, simply ethnocentric thinking on the part of the author. He was in the unique position of knowing this yearning for a soul to be quite valid.

Now that he was aware of his loss, the queer, crippling inward lack tormented him. It had pre-

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sumably tormented the Little Mermaid and others. Like him, they had had immortality. Being extra-human they had probably possessed this curious, light-headed, light-hearted freedom which even now interposed a cushion of partial indifference between Fenwick and his loss. Were not the gods supposed to spend their days in just this simple-minded joy, laughing and singing, dancing and drinking endlessly, never weary, never bored?

Up to a point it was wonderful. But once you began to suspect that something had been removed, you lost your taste for the Olympian life and began at all costs to crave a soul. Why? Fenwick couldn't say. He only *knew*. . . .

At this moment the cool summer dawn shimmered between him and the window, and the devil stood before James Fenwick.

Fenwick shuddered slightly.

"The bargain," he said, "was for eternity."

"Yes," the devil said. "Only you can abrogate it."

"Well, I don't intend to," Fenwick told him sharply. "How did you happen to show up at just this moment?"

"I thought I heard my name called," the devil said. "Did you want to speak to me? I seemed to catch a note of despair in your mind. How do you feel? Bored yet? Ready to end it?"

"Certainly not," Fenwick said. "But if I were, it's because you swindled me. I want a word with you. What was it you took out of my head in your closed hand the day of our pact?"

"I don't care to discuss it," the devil said, lashing his tail slightly.

"Well, I care," Fenwick cried. "You told me it was only a few unimportant memories I'd never miss."

"And so it was," the devil said, grinning.

"It was my soul!" Fenwick said, striking the bedclothes angrily. "You cheated me. You collected my soul in advance, and now I can't enjoy the immortality I bought with it. This is out-and-out breach of contract."

"What seems to be the trouble?" the devil asked.

"There must be a great many things I'd enjoy doing, if I had my soul back," Fenwick said. "I could take up music and become a great musician, if I had my soul. I always liked music, and I have eternity to learn in. Or I could study mathematics. I could learn nuclear physics and, who knows, with all the time and money and knowledge in the world at my command, there's no limit to the things I could achieve. I could even blow up the world and rob you of all future souls. How would you like that?"

The devil laughed politely and polished his talons on his sleeve.

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"Don't laugh," Fenwick said. "It's perfectly true. I could study medicine and prolong human life. I could study politics and economics and put an end to wars and suffering. I could study crime and fill up Hell with new converts. I could do anything — if I had my soul back. But without it — well, everything is too — too peaceful." Fenwick's shoulders sagged disconsolately. "I feel cut off from humanity," he said. "Everything I do is blocked. But I'm calm and carefree. I'm not even unhappy. And yet I don't know what to do next. Nothing is exciting anymore. I —"

"In a word, you're bored," the devil said. "Excuse me if I don't show enough sympathy for your plight."

"In a word, you swindled me," Fenwick said. "I want my soul back."

"I told you exactly what it was I took," the devil said.

"My soul!"

"Not at all," the devil assured him. "I'm afraid I shall have to leave you now."

"Give me back my soul, you swindler!"

"Try and make me do it," the devil said with a broad grin. The first ray of the morning sun shimmered in the cool air of the bedroom, and in the shimmer the devil dissolved and vanished.

"Very well," Fenwick said to the emptiness. "Very well, I will."

"Read any bad books lately"

He wasted no time about it. Or, at least, no more time than his curious, carefree placidity enforced.

"How can I bring pressure on the dev-

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il?" he asked himself. "By blocking him in some way? I don't see how. Well, then, by depriving him of something he values? What does he value? Souls. All souls. *My* soul. Hm-m-m." He frowned pensively. "I could," he reflected, "repent. . . ."

Fenwick thought all day about it. The idea tempted him, and yet of course in a way it was self-defeating. The consequences were unpredictable. Besides, he was not sure how to go about it. To undertake a lifetime of good deeds seemed so boring.

In the evening he went out alone and walked at twilight through the streets, thinking deeply. The people he passed were like transient shadows reflected on the screen of time. They had no significance. The air was sweet and calm, and if it had not been for this sense of nagging injustice, the aimless inability to use the immortality he had paid so highly for, he would have felt entirely at peace.

Presently the sound of music penetrated his rapt senses and he looked up to find himself outside the portals of a great cathedral. Shadowy people went up and down the steps. From within deep organ music rolled, the sound of singing emerged, occasional waves of incense were sweet on the air. It was most impressive.

Fenwick thought, "I could go up and embrace the altar and shout out my repentance." He put his foot on the bottom step, but then he hesitated and felt that he could not face it. The cathedral was too impressive. He would feel like such a fool. And yet —

He walked on, undecided. He walked a long way.

Again the sound of music interrupted his thinking. This time he was passing a vacant lot upon which a large revival tent had been pitched. There was a great deal of noise coming out of it. Music pounded wildly through the canvas walls. Men and women were singing and shouting inside.

Fenwick paused, struck by hope. Here at least he could do his repenting without attracting more than a passing glance. He hesitated briefly and then went in.

It was very noisy, crowded and confused inside. But before Fenwick an aisle stretched between benches toward an altar, of sorts, with several highly excited people clustered under the uplifted arms of an even more highly excited speaker in an improvised pulpit.

Fenwick started down the aisle.

"How should I phrase this?" he wondered, walking slowly. "Just 'I repent'? Is that enough? Or something like, 'I have sold my soul to the devil and I hereby repudiate the bargain?' Are legal terms necessary?"

He had almost reached the altar when the air shimmered before

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him and the crimson outlines of the devil appeared very faintly, a mere three-dimensional sketch upon the dusty air.

"I wouldn't do this if I were you," the pale image said.

Fenwick sneered and walked through him.

At this the devil pulled himself together and appeared in full form and color in the aisle, blocking Fenwick's way.

"I wish you wouldn't create scenes like this," the devil said pettishly. "I can't tell you how uncomfortable I feel here. Kindly don't be a fool, Fenwick."

Several people in the crowd cast curious glances at the devil, but no one seemed unduly interested. Most probably thought him a costumed attendant, and those who knew him for what he was may have been accustomed to the sight, or perhaps they expected some such apparition in such a place at such a time. There was no disturbance.

"Out of my way," Fenwick said. "My mind is made up."

"You're cheating," the devil complained. "I can't allow it."

"You cheated," Fenwick reminded him. "Try and stop me."

"I will," the devil said, and reached out both taloned hands.

Fenwick laughed. "I am a system enclosed within itself," he said. "You can't harm me, remember?"

The devil gnashed his teeth.

Fenwick brushed the crimson form aside and went on.

Behind him the devil said, "Oh, very well, Fenwick. You win."

Relieved, Fenwick turned. "Will you give me back my soul?"

"I'll give you back what I took as surety," the devil said, "but you won't like it."

"Hand it over," Fenwick said. "I don't believe a word you say."

"I am the father of lies," the devil said, "but this time —"

"Never mind," Fenwick said. "Just give me back my soul."

"Not here. I find this very uncomfortable," the devil told him. "Come with me. Don't cringe like that, I merely want to take you to your apartment. We need privacy."

He lifted his crimson hands and sketched a wall around himself and Fenwick. Immediately the pushing crowds, the shouting and tumult faded and the walls of Fenwick's sumptuous apartment rose around them. Slightly breathless, Fenwick crossed the familiar floor and looked out the window. He was indubitably at home again.

"That was clever," he congratulated the devil. "Now give me back my soul."

"I will give you back the part of it I removed," the devil said. "It was not in violation of the contract, but a bargain is a bargain. I think it only fair to warn you, however, that you won't like it."

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"No shilly-shallying," Fenwick said. "I don't expect you to admit you cheated."

"You are warned," the devil said.

"Hand it over."

The devil shrugged. He then put his hand into his own chest, groped for a moment, murmuring, "I put it away for safekeeping," and withdrew his closed fist. "Turn around," he said. Fenwick did so. He felt a cool breeze pass through his head from the back. . . .

"Stand still," the devil said from behind him. "This will take a moment or two. You are a fool, you know. I expected better entertainment, or I'd never have troubled myself to go through this farce. My poor stupid friend, it was not your soul I took. It was merely certain unconscious memories, as I said all along."

"Then why," Fenwick demanded, "am I unable to enjoy my immortality? What is it that stops me at the threshold of everything I attempt? I'm tired of living like a god if I have to stop with immortality only, and no real pleasure in it."

"Hold still," the devil said. "There. My dear Fenwick, you are not a god. You're a very limited mortal man. Your own limitations are all that stand in your way. In a million years you could never become a great musician or a great economist or any of the greats you dream of. It simply isn't in you. Immortality has nothing to do with it. Oddly enough . . ." And here the devil sighed. "Oddly enough, those who make bargains with me never do have the capability to use their gifts. I suppose only inferior minds expect to get something for nothing. Yours is distinctly inferior."

The cool breeze ceased.

"There you are," the devil said. "I have now returned what I took. It was, in Freudian terms, simply your superego."

"Superego?" Fenwick echoed, turning. "I don't quite —"

"Understand?" the devil finished for him, suddenly smiling broadly. "You will. It is the structure of early learning built up in your unconscious mind. It guides your impulses into channels acceptable to society. In a word, my poor Fenwick, I have just restored your conscience. Why did you think you felt so light and carefree without it?"

Fenwick drew breath to reply, but it was too late.

The devil had vanished. He stood alone in the room.

Well, no, not entirely alone. There was a mirror over the fireplace and in the mirror he met his own appalled eyes in the instant the superego took up again the interrupted function of the conscience.

A terrible, smashing awareness

(*Continued on page 146*)

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TIME BUM

By C. M. KORNBLUTH

Here is a story that would have delighted Damon Runyon. Even Harry the Horse, that Broadway immortal, would be forced to doff his hat to Harry Twenty-Third Street, the snappy dresser who came up with a completely new con game. For once this story gets around the local hangouts, the wise boys are going to drop their money machines and gold-mine stocks and start buying up lists of subscribers to science-fiction magazines. Yes sir, here's one racket that is sure-fire — provided you're willing to take the chance that the ending to Time Bum is pure fiction.

But God help you if you're wrong!

HARRY Twenty-Third Street suddenly burst into laughter. His friend and sometimes roper Farmer Brown looked inquisitive.

"I just thought of a new con," Harry Twenty-Third Street said, still chuckling.

Farmer Brown shook his head positively. "There's no such thing, my man," he said. "There are only new switches on old cons. What have you

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got — a store con? Shall you be needing a roper?" He tried not to look eager as a matter of principle, but everybody knew the Farmer needed a connection badly. His girl had two-timed him on a badger game, running off with the chump and marrying him after an expensive, month-long buildup.

Harry said, "Sorry, old boy. No details. It's too good to split up. I shall rip and tear the suckers with this con for many a year, I trust, before the details become available to the trade. Nobody, but nobody, is going to call copper after I take him. It's beautiful and it's mine. I will see you around, my friend."

Harry got up from the booth and left, nodding cheerfully to a safeblower here, a fixer there, on his way to the locked door of the hangout. Naturally he didn't nod to such small fry as pickpockets and dope peddlers. Harry had his pride.

The puzzled Farmer sipped his lemon squash and concluded that Harry had been kidding him. He noticed that Harry had left behind him in the booth a copy of a magazine with a space ship and a pretty girl in green bra and pants on the cover.

"A furnished . . . bungalow?" the man said hesitantly, as though he knew what he wanted but wasn't quite sure of the word.

"Certainly, Mr. Clurg," Walter Lachlan said. "I'm sure we can suit you. Wife and family?"

"No," said Clurg. "They are . . . far away." He seemed to get some secret amusement from the thought. And then, to Walter's horror, he sat down calmly in empty air beside the desk and, of course, crashed to the floor looking ludicrous and astonished.

Walter gaped and helped him up, sputtering apologies and wondering privately what was wrong with the man. There wasn't a chair there. There was a chair on the other side of the desk and a chair against the wall. But there just wasn't a chair where Clurg had sat down.

Clurg apparently was unhurt; he protested against Walter's apologies, saying: "I should have known, Master Lachlan. It's quite all right; it was all my fault. What about the bang — the bungalow?"

Business sense triumphed over Walter's bewilderment. He pulled out his listings and they conferred on the merits of several furnished bungalows. When Walter mentioned that the Curran place was especially nice, in an especially nice neighborhood — he lived up the street himself — Clurg was impressed. "I'll take that one," he said. "What is the . . . feoff?"

Walter had learned a certain amount of law for his real-estate license examination; he recognized the word. "The *rent* is seventy-five

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dollars," he said. "You speak English very well, Mr. Clurg." He hadn't been certain that the man was a foreigner until the dictionary word came out. "You have hardly any accent."

"Thank you," Clurg said, pleased. "I worked hard at it. Let me see — seventy-five is six twelves and three." He opened one of his shiny-new leather suitcases and calmly laid six heavy little paper rolls on Walter's desk. He broke open a seventh and laid down three mint-new silver dollars. "There I am," he said. "I mean, there you are."

Walter didn't know what to say. It had never happened before. People paid by check or in bills. They just didn't pay in silver dollars. But it was money — why shouldn't Mr. Clurg pay in silver dollars if he wanted to? He shook himself, scooped the rolls into his top desk drawer and said: "I'll drive you out there if you like. It's nearly quitting-time anyway."

Walter told his wife Betty over the dinner table: "We ought to have him in some evening. I can't imagine where on Earth he comes from. I had to show him how to turn on the kitchen range. When it went on he said, 'Oh, yes — electricity!' and laughed his head off. And he kept ducking the question when I tried to ask him in a nice way. Maybe he's some kind of a political refugee."

"Maybe . . ." Betty began dreamily, and then shut her mouth. She didn't want Walter laughing at her again. As it was, he made her buy her science-fiction magazines downtown instead of at neighborhood newsstands. He thought it wasn't becoming for his wife to read them. He's so eager for success, she thought sentimentally.

That night, while Walter watched a television variety show, she read a story in one of her magazines. (Its cover, depicting a space ship and a girl in green bra and shorts, had been prudently torn off and thrown away.) It was about a man from the future who had gone back in time, bringing with him all sorts of marvelous inventions. In the end the Time Police punished him for unauthorized time traveling. They had come back and got him, brought him back to his own time. She smiled. It *would* be nice if Mr. Clurg, instead of being a slightly eccentric foreigner, were a man from the future with all sorts of interesting stories to tell and a satchelful of gadgets that could be sold for millions and millions of dollars.

After a week they did have Clurg over for dinner. It started badly. Once more he managed to sit down in empty air and crash to the floor. While they were

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brushing him off he said fretfully: "I *can't* get used to not —" and then said no more.

He was a picky eater. Betty had done one of her mother's specialties, veal cutlet with tomato sauce, topped by a poached egg. He ate the egg and sauce, made a clumsy attempt to cut up the meat, and abandoned it. She served a plate of cheese, half a dozen kinds, for dessert, and Clurg tasted them uncertainly, breaking off a crumb from each, while Betty wondered where that constituted good manners. His face lit up when he tried a ripe cheddar. He popped the whole wedge into his mouth and said to Betty: "I will have that, please."

"Seconds?" asked Walter. "Sure. Don't bother, Betty. I'll get it." He brought back a quarter-pound wedge of the cheddar.

Walter and Betty watched silently as Clurg calmly ate every crumb of it. He sighed. "Very good. Quite like —" The word, Walter and Betty later agreed, was *see-mon-joe*. They were able to agree quite early in the evening, because Clurg got up after eating the cheese, said warmly, "Thank you so much!" and walked out of the house.

Betty said, "*What — on — Earth!*"

Walter said uneasily, "I'm sorry, doll. I didn't think he'd be quite that peculiar —"

"— But after *all!*"

"— Of course he's a foreigner. What was that word?"

He jotted it down.

While they were doing the dishes Betty said, "I think he was drunk. Falling-down drunk."

"No," Walter said. "It's exactly the same thing he did in my office. As though he expected a chair to come to him instead of him going to a chair." He laughed and said uncertainly, "Or maybe he's royalty. I read once about Queen Victoria never looking around before she sat down, she was so sure there'd be a chair there."

"Well, there isn't any more royalty, not to speak of," she said angrily, hanging up the dish towel. "What's on TV tonight?"

"Uncle Miltie. But . . . uh . . . I think I'll read. Uh . . . where do you keep those magazines of yours, doll? Believe I'll give them a try."

She gave him a look that he wouldn't meet, and she went to get him some of her magazines. She also got a slim green book which she hadn't looked at for years. While Walter flipped uneasily through the magazines she studied the book.

After about ten minutes she said: "Walter. *Seemonjoe*. I think I know what language it is."

He was instantly alert. "Yeah? What?"

"It should be spelled c-i-m-a-n-g-o, with little jiggers

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over the C and G. It means 'universal food' in Esperanto."

"Where's Esperanto?" he demanded.

"Esperanto isn't anywhere. It's an artificial language. I played around with it a little once. It was supposed to end war and all sorts of things. Some people called it 'the language of the future'." Her voice was tremulous.

Walter said, "I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

He saw Clurg go into the neighborhood movie for the matinee. That gave him about three hours.

Walter hurried to the Curran bungalow, remembered to slow down and tried hard to look casual as he unlocked the door and went in. There wouldn't be any trouble — he was a good citizen, known and respected — he could let himself into a tenant's house and wait for him to talk about business if he wanted to.

He tried not to think of what people would think if he should be caught rifling Clurg's luggage, as he intended to do. He had brought along an assortment of luggage keys. Surprised by his own ingenuity, he had got them at a locksmith's by saying his own key was lost and he didn't want to haul a heavy packed bag downtown.

But he didn't need the keys. In the bedroom closet the two suitcases stood, unlocked.

There was nothing in the first except uniformly new clothes, bought locally at good shops. The second was full of the same. Going through a rather extreme sports jacket, Walter found a wad of paper in the breast pocket. It was a newspaper page. A number had been penciled on a margin; apparently the sheet had been torn out and stuck into the pocket and forgotten. The dateline on the paper was July 18th, 2403.

Walter had some trouble reading the stories at first, but found it was easy enough if he read them aloud and listened to his voice.

One said:

TAIM KOP NABD:
PROSKYOOTR ASKS DETH

Patrolm'n Oskr Garth 'v thi Taim Polis w'z arest'd toodei at hiz hom, 4365 9863th Strit, and bookd at 9768th Prisint on tchardg'z 'v Polis-Ekspozh'r. Thi aledjd Ekspozh'r okur'd hwaile Garth w'z on dooti in thi Twenti-Furst Sentch'ri. It konsist'd 'v hiz admish'n too a sit'zen 'v thi Twenti-Furst Sentch'ri that thi Taim Polis ekzisted and woz op'rated fr'm thi Twenti-Fifth Sentch'ri. The Proskyoot'rz Ofis sed thi deth pen'lti wil be askt in vyoo 'v thi heinus neitch'r 'v thi ofens, hwitch thret'nz thi hwol fabrik 'v Twenti-Fifth-Sentchri eksiztens.

There was an advertisement on the other side:

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BOIZ 'ND YUNG MEN!
SERV EUR SENTCH'RI!
ENLIST IN THI TAIM POLIS
RISURV NOW!
RIMEMB'R —
ONLI IN THI TAIM POLIS
KAN EU SI THE
PAJENT 'V THI AJEZ!
ONLY IN THI TAIM POLIS
KAN EU PROTEKT EUR
SIVILIZASH'N FR'M
VARI'NS! THEIR IZ NO
HAIER SERVIS TOO AR
KULTCH'R! THEIR IZ NO
K'REER SO FAS'NATING
AZ A K'REER IN THI TAIM
POLIS!

Underneath it another ad asked:

HWAI BI ASHEIM'D 'V EUR°
TCHAIRZ? GET ROLFASTS!

No uth'r tcheir haz thi immidjit respons 'v a Rolfast. Sit enihweir — eor Rolfast iz their!

Eur Rolfast met'l partz ar solid gold too avoid tairsum polishing. Eur Rolfast beirings are thi fain'st six-intch dupliks di'mondz for long wair.

Walter's heart pounded. Gold — to avoid tiresome polishing! Six-inch diamonds — for long wear!

And Clurg must be a time policeman. "Only in the time police can you see the pageant of the ages!" What did a time policeman do? He wasn't quite clear about that. But what they *didn't* do was let anybody else — anybody earlier — know that the Time Police existed. He, Walter Lachlan of the Twentieth Century, held in the palm of his hand Time Policeman Clurg of the Twenty-Fifth Century — the Twenty-Fifth Century where gold and diamonds were common as steel and glass in this!

He was there when Clurg came back from the matinee.

Mutely, Walter extended the page of newsprint. Clurg snatched it incredulously, stared at it and crumpled it in his fist. He collapsed on the floor with a groan. "I'm done for!" Walter heard him say.

"Listen, Clurg," Walter said. "Nobody ever needs to know about this — *nobody*."

Clurg looked up with sudden hope in his eyes. "You will keep silent?" he asked wildly. "It is my life!"

"What's it worth to you?" Walter demanded with brutal directness. "I can use some of those diamonds and some of that gold. Can you get it into this century?"

"It would be missed. It would be over my mass-balance," Clurg said. "But I have a Duplix. I can copy diamonds and gold for you; that was how I made my feoff money."

He snatched an instrument from his pocket — a fountain pen, Walter thought. "It is low in charge. It would Duplix about five kilograms in one operation —"

"You mean," Walter demanded,

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"that if I brought you five kilograms of diamonds and gold you could duplicate it? And the originals wouldn't be harmed? Let me see that thing. Can I work it?"

Clurg passed over the "fountain pen". Walter saw that within the case was a tangle of wires, tiny tubes, lenses — he passed it back hastily. Clurg said, "That is correct. You could buy or borrow jewelry and I could duplix it. Then you could return the originals and retain the copies. You swear by your contemporary God that you would say nothing?"

Walter was thinking. He could scrape together a good 30,000 dollars by pledging the house, the business, his own real estate, the bank account, the life insurance, the securities. Put it all into diamonds, of course, and then — *doubled! Overnight!*

"I'll say nothing," he told Clurg. "If you come through." He took the sheet from the 25th-century newspaper from Clurg's hands and put it securely in his own pocket. "When I get those diamonds duplicated," he said, "I'll burn this and forget the rest. Until then, I want you to stay close to home. I'll come around in a day or so with the stuff for you to duplicate."

Clurg nervously promised.

The secrecy, of course, didn't include Betty. He told her when he got home and she let out a yell of delight. She demanded the newspaper, read it avidly, and then demanded to see Clurg.

"I don't think he'll talk," Walter said doubtfully. "But if you really want to . . ."

She did, and they walked to the Curran bungalow. Clurg was gone, lock, stock and barrel, leaving not a trace behind. They waited for hours, nervously.

At last Betty said, "He's gone back."

Walter nodded. "He wouldn't keep his bargain, but by God I'm going to keep mine. Come along. We're going to the *Enterprise*."

"Walter," she said. "You wouldn't — would you?"

He went alone, after a bitter quarrel.

At the *Enterprise* office he was wearily listened to by a reporter, who wearily looked over the 25th-century newspaper. "I don't know what you're peddling, Mr. Lachlan," he said, "but we like people to buy their ads in the *Enterprise*. This is a pretty bare-faced publicity grab."

"But —" Walter sputtered.

"Sam, would you please ask Mr. Morris to come up here if he can?" the reporter was saying into the phone. To Walter he explained, "Mr. Morris is our press-room foreman."

The foreman was a huge, white-haired old fellow, partly deaf. The reporter showed him the newspaper from the twenty-fifth cen-

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tury and said, "How about this?"

Mr. Morris looked at it and smelled it and said, showing no interest in the reading matter: "American Type Foundry Futura number nine, discontinued about ten years ago. It's been hand-set. The ink — hard to say. Expensive stuff, not a news ink. A book ink, a job-printing ink. The paper, now, I know. A nice linen rag that Benziger jobs in Philadelphia."

"You see, Mr. Lachlin? It's a fake." The reporter shrugged.

Walter walked slowly from the city room. The press-room foreman *knew*. It was a fake. And Clurg was a faker. Suddenly Walter's heels touched the ground after twenty-four hours and stayed there. Good God, the diamonds! Clurg was a conman! He would have worked a package switch! He would have had thirty thousand dollars' worth of diamonds for less than a month's work!

He told Betty about it when he got home and she laughed unmercifully. "Time Policeman" was to become a family joke between the Lachlans.

Harry Twenty-Third Street stood, blinking, in a very peculiar place. Peculiarly, his feet were firmly encased, up to the ankles, in a block of clear plastic.

There were odd-looking people and a big voice was saying: "May it please the court. The People of the Twenty-Fifth Century versus Harold Parish, alias Harry Twenty-Third Street, alias Clurg, of the Twentieth Century. The charge is impersonating an officer of the Time Police. The Prosecutor's Office will ask the death penalty in view of the heinous nature of the offense, which threatens the whole fabric —"

SATAN SENDS FLOWERS

(Continued from page 137)

struck down upon Fenwick like the hand of a punishing God. He knew now what he had done. He remembered his crimes.

His knees buckled under him. The world turned dark and roared in his ears. Guilt was a burden he could hardly stagger under. The images of the things he had seen and done in the years of his carefree evil were thunder and lightning that shook the brain in his skull. Intolerable anguish roared through his mind and he struck his hands to his eyes to blot out vision, but he could not blot out memory.

Staggering, he turned and stumbled toward his bedroom door. He tore it open, reeled across the room and reached into a bureau drawer. He took out a revolver.

He lifted the revolver, and the devil came in.

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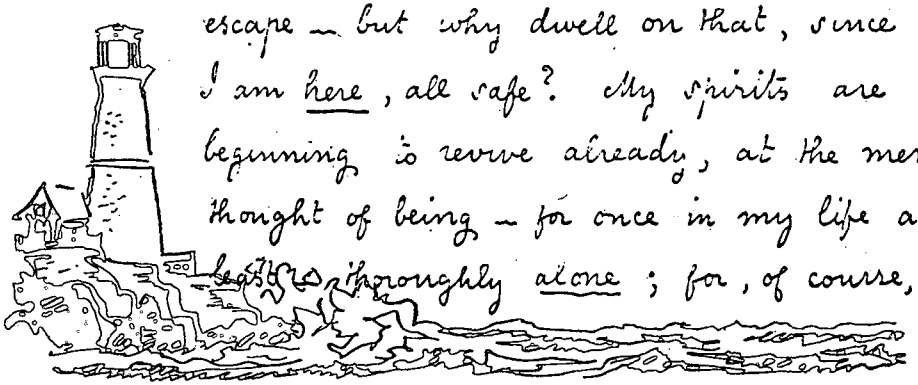
THE LIGHTHOUSE

BY EDGAR ALLEN POE
AND ROBERT BLOCH

Jan 1 — 179b. This day — my first on the light-house — I make this entry in my Diary, as agreed on with De Grät. As regularly as I can keep the journal, I will — but there is no telling what may happen to a man all alone as I am — I may get sick, or worse.... So far well! The cutter had a narrow escape — but why dwell on that, since I am here, all safe? My spirits are beginning to revive already, at the mere thought of being — for once in my life at least — thoroughly alone; for, of course,



The assistance of Prof. T. O. Mabbott, foremost Poe scholar, in obtaining this manuscript, is gratefully acknowledged

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Neptune, large as he is, is not to be taken into consideration as "society". Would to Heaven I had ever found in "society" one half as much faith as in this poor dog: — in such case I and "society" might never have parted — even for the year... What most surprises me, is the difficulty De Grät had in getting me the appointment — and I a noble of the realm! It could not be that the Consistory had any doubt of my ability to manage the light. One man has attended it before now — and got on quite as well as

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The editors of FANTASTIC *are proud to present, for the first time in the pages of any magazine, the story on which Edgar Allan Poe was at work when he died. Now, over one hundred years later, it has been completed by a modern-day master of the horror story. His name is Robert Bloch, author of such classic tales of terror as Yours Truly — Jack the Ripper, The Cloak, and many other spine tinglers.*

Here's your chance to be a literary detective! Tell us, if you can, where the old master put down his pen for the last time, and where the young man from Milwaukee took over for him a century later.

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THE LIGHTHOUSE

Jan.1 — 1796. This day — my first on the lighthouse — I make this entry in my Diary, as agreed on with DeGrät. As regularly as I *can* keep the journal, I will — but there is no telling what may happen to a man all alone as I am — I may get sick or worse. . . .

So far well! The cutter had a narrow escape — but why dwell on that, since I am *here*, all safe? My spirits are beginning to revive already, at the mere thought of being — for once in my life at least — thoroughly *alone;* for, of course, Neptune, large as he is, is not to be taken into consideration as "society". Would to Heaven I had ever found in "society" one half as much *faith* as in this poor dog; — in such case I and "society" might never have parted — even for a year. . . .

What most surprises me, is the difficulty DeGrät had in getting me the appointment — and I a noble of the realm! It could not be that the Consistory had any doubt of my ability to manage the light. *One* man has attended it before now — and got on quite as well as the three that are usually put in. The duty is a mere nothing; and the printed instructions are as plain as possible. It would never have done to let Orndoff accompany me. I should never have made any way with my book as long as he was within reach of me, with his intolerable gossip — not to mention that everlasting meerschaum. Besides, I wish to be *alone*. . . .

It is strange that I never observed, until this moment, how dreary a sound that word has — "alone"! I could half fancy there was some peculiarity in the echo of these cylindrical walls — but oh, no! — that is all nonsense. I do believe I am going to get nervous about my insulation. *That* will never do. I have not forgotten DeGrät's prophecy. Now for a scramble to the lantern and a good look around to "see what I can see". . . . To see what I can see indeed! — not very much. The swell is subsiding a little, I think — but the cutter will have a rough passage home, nevertheless. She will hardly get within sight of the Norland before noon tomorrow — and yet it can hardly be more than 190 or 200 miles.

Jan. 2. I have passed this day in a species of ecstasy that I find it impossible to describe. My passion for solitude could scarcely have been more thoroughly gratified. I do not say *satisfied;* for I believe

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I should never be satiated with such delight as I have experienced today. . . .

The wind lulled after daybreak, and by the afternoon the sea had gone down materially. . . . Nothing to be seen with the telescope even, but ocean and sky, with an occasional gull.

Jan. 3. A dead calm all day. Towards evening, the sea looked very much like glass. A few seaweeds came in sight; but besides them absolutely *nothing* all day — not even the slightest speck of cloud. . . . Occupied myself in exploring the lighthouse. . . . It is a very lofty one — as I find to my cost when I have to ascend its interminable stairs — not quite 160 feet, I should say, from the low-water mark to the top of the lantern. From the bottom *inside* the shaft, however, the distance to the summit is 180 feet at least: — thus the floor is 20 feet below the surface of the sea, even at low-tide. . . .

It seems to me that the hollow interior at the bottom should have been filled in with solid masonry. Undoubtedly the whole would have been thus rendered more *safe:* — but what am I thinking about? A structure such as this is safe enough under any circumstances. I should feel myself secure in it during the fiercest hurricane that ever raged — and yet I have heard seamen say that, occasionally, with a wind at South-West, the sea has been known to run higher here than anywhere, with the single exception of the Western opening of the Straits of Magellan.

No mere sea, though, could accomplish anything with this solid iron-riveted wall — which, at 50 feet from high-water mark, is four feet thick, if one inch. The basis on which the structure rests seems to me to be chalk. . . .

Jan. 4. I am now prepared to resume work on my book, having spent this day in familiarizing myself with a regular routine.

My actual duties will be, I perceive, absurdly simple — the light requires little tending beyond a periodic replenishment of the oil for the six-wick burner. As to my own needs, they are easily satisfied, and the exertion of an occasional trip down the stairs is all I must anticipate.

At the base of the stairs is the entrance room; beneath that is twenty feet of empty shaft. Above the entrance room, at the next turn of the circular iron staircase, is my store-room which contains the casks of fresh water and the food supplies, plus linens and other daily needs. Above that — again another spiral of those interminable stairs! — is the oil room, completely filled with the tanks from which I must feed the wicks. Fortunately, I perceive

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that I can limit my descent to the store-room to once a week if I choose, for it is possible for me to carry sufficient provisions in one load to supply both myself and Neptune for such a period. As to the oil supply, I need only to bring up two drums every three days and thus insure a constant illumination. If I choose, I can place a dozen or more spare drums on the platform near the light and thus provide for several weeks to come.

So it is that in my daily existence I can limit my movements to the upper half of the lighthouse; that is to say, the three spirals opening on the topmost three levels. The lowest is my "living room" — and it is here, of course, that Neptune is confined the greater part of the day; here, too, that I plan to write at a desk near the wall-slit that affords a view of the sea without. The second highest level is my bedroom and kitchen combined. Here the weekly rations of food and water are contained in cupboards for that purpose; here, too, is the ingenious stove fed by the self-same oil that lights the beacon above. The topmost level is the service room giving access to the light itself and to the platform surrounding it. Since the light is fixed, and its reflectors set, there is no need for me ever to ascend to the platform save when replenishing the oil supply or making a repair or adjustment as per the written instructions — a circumstance which may well never arise during my stay here.

Already I have carried enough oil, water and provender to the upper levels to last me for an entire month — I need stir from my two rooms only to replenish the wicks.

For the rest, I am free! utterly free — my time is my own, and in this lofty realm I rule as King. Although Neptune is my only living subject I can well imagine that I am sovereign o'er all I see — ocean below and stars above. I am master of the sun that rises in rubicund radiance from the sea at dawn, emperor of wind and monarch of the gale, sultan of the waves that sport or roar in roiling torrents about the base of my palace pinnacle. I command the moon in the heavens, and the very ebb and flow of the tide does homage to my reign.

But enough of fancies — De-Grät warned me to refrain from morbid or from grandiose speculation — now I shall take up in all earnestness the task that lies before me. Yet this night, as I sit before the window in the starlight, the tides sweeping against these lofty walls can only echo my exultation; I am free — and, at last, alone!

Jan. 11. A week has passed since my last entry in this diary, and

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as I read it over, I can scarce comprehend that it was I who penned those words.

Something has happened — the nature of which lies unfathomed. I have worked, eaten, slept, replenished the wicks twice. My outward existence has been placid. I can ascribe the alteration in my feelings to naught but some inner alchemy; enough to say that a disturbing change has taken place.

Alone! I, who breathed the word as if it were some mystic incantation bestowing peace, have come — I realize it now — to loathe the very sound of the syllables. And the ghastliness of meaning I know full well.

It is a dismaying, it is a dreadful thing, to be alone. Truly alone, as I am, with only Neptune to exist beside me and by his breathing presence remind me that I am not the sole inhabitant of a blind and senseless universe. The sun and stars that wheel overhead in their endless cycle seem to rush across the horizon unheeding — and, of late, unheeded, for I cannot fix my mind upon them with normal constancy. The sea that swirls or ripples below me is naught but a purposeless chaos of utter emptiness.

I thought myself to be a man of singular self-sufficiency, beyond the petty needs of a boring and banal society. How wrong I was! — for I find myself longing for the sight of another face, the sound of another voice, the touch of other hands whether they offer caresses or blows. Anything, anything for reassurement that my dreams are indeed false and that I am *not*, actually, alone.

And yet I *am*. I am, and I will be. The world is two hundred miles away; I will not know it again for an entire year. And it in turn — but no more! I cannot put down my thoughts while in the grip of this morbid mood.

Jan. 13. Two more days — two more centuries! — have passed. Can it be less than two weeks since I was immured in this prison tower? I mount the turret of my dungeon and gaze at the horizon; I am not hemmed in by bars of steel but by columns and pillars and webs of wild and raging water. The sea has changed; gray skies have wrought a wizardry so that I stand surrounded by a tumult that threatens to become a tempest.

I turn away, for I can bear no more, and descend to my room. I seek to write — the book is bravely begun, but of late I can bring myself to do nothing constructive or creative — and in a moment I fling aside my pen and rise to pace. To endlessly pace the narrow, circular confines of my tower of torment.

Wild words, these? And yet I am not alone in my affliction —

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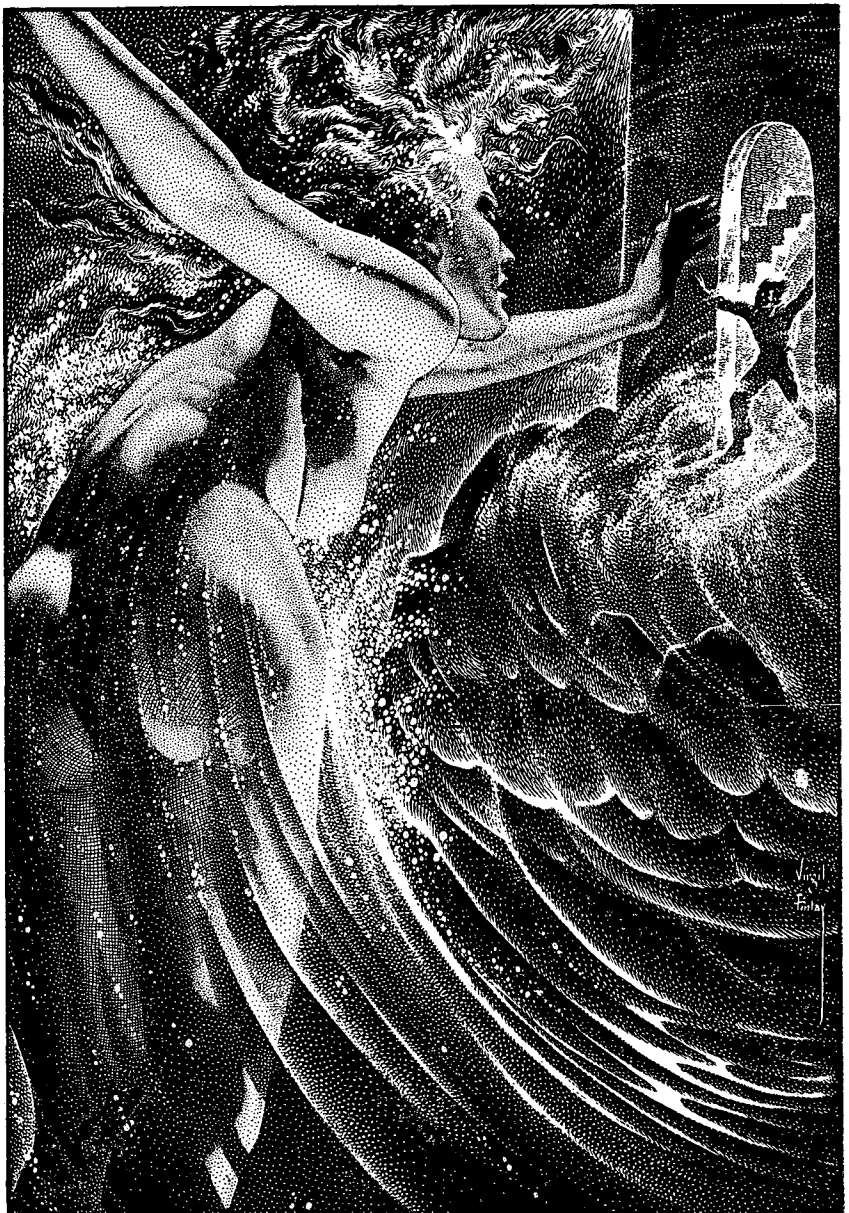

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Neptune, Neptune the loyal, the calm, the placid — feels it too.

Perhaps it is but the approach of the storm that agitates him so — for Nature bears closer kinship with the beast. He stays constantly at my side, whining now, and the muffled roaring of the waves without our prison causes him to tremble. There is a chill in the air that our stove cannot dissipate, but it is not cold that oppresses him. . . .

I have just mounted to the platform and gazed out at the spectacle of gathering storm. The waves are fantastically high; they sweep against the lighthouse in titanic tumult. These solid walls of stone shudder rhythmically with each onslaught. The churning sea is gray no longer — the water is black, black as basalt and as heavy. The sky's hue has deepened so that at the moment no horizon is visible. I am surrounded by a billowing blackness thundering against me. . . .

Back below now, as lightning flickers. The storm will break soon, and Neptune howls piteously. I stroke his quivering flanks, but the poor animal shrinks away. It seems that he fears even my presence; can it be that my own features betray an equal agitation? I do not know — I only feel that I am helpless, trapped here and awaiting the mercy of the storm. I cannot write much longer.

And yet I will set down a further statement. I must, if only to prove to myself that reason again prevails. In writing of my venture up to the platform — my viewing of the sea and sky — I omitted to mention the meaning of a single moment. There came upon me, as I gazed down at the black and boiling madness of the waters below, a wild and willful craving to become one with it. But why should I disguise the naked truth? — I felt an insane impulse to hurl myself into the sea!

It has passed now; passed, I pray, forever. I did not yield to this perverse prompting and I am back here in my quarters, writing calmly once again. Yet the fact remains — the hideous urge to destroy myself came suddenly, and with the force of one of those monstrous waves.

And what — I force myself to realize — was the meaning of my demented desire? It was that I sought escape, escape from loneliness. It was as if by mingling with the sea and the storm I would no longer be *alone.*

But I defy the elements. I defy the powers of the earth and of the heavens. Alone I am, alone I *must* be — and come what may, I shall survive! My laughter rises above all your thunder!

So — ye spirits of the storm — blow, howl, rage, hurl your watery weight against my fortress — I am greater than you in all your

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powers. But wait! Neptune . . . something has happened to the creature — I must attend him.

Jan. 16. The storm is abated. I am back at my desk now, alone — truly alone. I have locked poor Neptune in the store-room below; the unfortunate beast seems driven out of his wits by the forces of the storm. When last I wrote he was worked into a frenzy, whining and pawing and wheeling in circles. He was incapable of responding to my commands and I had no choice but to literally drag him down the stairs by the scruff of his neck and incarcerate him in the store-room where he could not come to harm. I own that concern for *my* safety was involved — the possibility of being imprisoned in this lighthouse with a mad dog must be avoided.

His howls, throughout the storm, were pitiable indeed, but now he is silent. When last I ventured to gaze into the room I perceived him sleeping, and I trust that rest and calm will restore him to my full companionship as before.

Companionship!

How shall I describe the horrors of the storm I faced *alone*?

In this diary entry I have prefaced a date — *January 16th* — but that is merely a guess. The storm has swept away all track of Time. Did it last a day, two days, three — as I now surmise — a week, or a century? I do *not* know.

I know only an endless raging of waters that threatened, time and again, to engulf the very pinnacle of the lighthouse. I know only an eternity of ebony, an eon of billowing black composed of sea and sky commingled. I only know that there were times when my own voice outroared the storm — but how can I convey the cause of *that*? There was a time, perhaps a full day, perhaps much longer, when I could not bear to rise from my couch but lay with my face buried in the pillows, weeping like a child. But mine were not the pure tears of childhood innocence — call them, rather, the tears of Lucifer upon the realization of his eternal fall from grace. It seemed to me that I was truly the victim of an endless damnation; condemned forever to remain a prisoner in a world of thunderous chaos.

There is no need to write of the fancies and fantasies which assailed me through those unhallowed hours. At times I felt that the lighthouse was giving way and that I would be swept into the sea. At times I knew myself to be a victim of a colossal plot — I cursed DeGrät for sending me, knowingly, to my doom. At times (and these were the worst moments of all) I felt the full force of loneliness, crashing down upon

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me in waves higher than those wrought by water.

But all has passed, and the sea — and myself — are calm again. A peculiar calmness, this; as I gaze out upon the water there are certain phenomena I was not aware of until this very moment.

Before setting down my observations, let me reassure myself that I am, indeed, *quite* calm; no trace of my former tremors or agitation yet remains. The transient madness induced by the storm has departed and my brain is free of phantasms — indeed, my perceptive faculties seem to be sharpened to an unusual acuity.

It is almost as though I find myself in possession of an additional sense, an ability to analyze and penetrate beyond former limitations superimposed by Nature.

The water on which I gaze is placid once more. The sky is only lightly leaden in hue. But wait — low on the horizon creeps a sudden flame! It is the sun, the Arctic sun in sullen splendour, emerging momentarily from the pall to incarnadine the ocean. Sun and sky, sea and air about me, turn to blood.

Can it be I who but a moment ago wrote of returned, regained sanity? I, who have just shrieked aloud, "Alone!" — and half-rising from my chair, heard the muffled booming echo reverberate through the lonely lighthouse, its sepulchral accent intoning "*Alone*!" in answer? It may be that I am, despite all resolution, going mad; if so, I pray the end comes soon.

Jan. 18. There will be no end! I have conceived a notion, a theory which my heightened faculties soon will test. I shall embark upon an experiment. . . .

Jan. 26. A week has passed here in my solitary prison. Solitary? — perhaps, but not for long. The experiment is proceeding. I must set down what has occurred.

The sound of the echo set me to thinking. One sends out one's voice and it comes back. One sends out one's thoughts and — can it be that there is a response? Sound, as we know, travels in waves and patterns. The emanations of the brain, perhaps, travel similarly. And they are not confined by physical laws of time, space, or *duration*.

Can one's thoughts produce a reply that *materializes*, just as one's voice produces an echo? An echo is a product of a certain vacuum. A thought . . .

Concentration is the key. I have been concentrating. My supplies are replenished, and Neptune — visited during my venture below — seems rational enough, although he shrinks away when I approach him. I have left him below and spent the past week here. Concentration, I repeat, is the key to my experiment.

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Concentration, by its very nature, is a difficult task: I addressed myself to it with no little trepidation. Strive but to remain seated quietly with a mind "empty" of all thought, and one finds in the space of a very few minutes that the errant body is engaged in all manner of distracting movement — foot tapping, finger twisting, facial grimacing.

This I managed to overcome after a matter of many hours — my first three days were virtually exhausted in an effort to rid myself of nervous agitation and assume the inner and outer tranquillity of the Indian *fakir*. Then came the task of "filling" the empty consciousness — filling it completely with *one* intense and concentrated effort of will.

What echo would I bring forth from nothingness? What companionship would I seek here in my loneliness? What was the sign or symbol I desired? What symbolized to me the whole absent world of life and light?

DeGrät would laugh me to scorn if he but knew the concept that I chose. Yet I, the cynical, the jaded, the decadent, searched my soul, plumbed my longing, and found that which I most desired — a simple sign, a token of all the earth removed: a fresh and growing flower, a *rose*!

Yes, a simple rose is what I have sought — a rose, torn from its living stem, perfumed with the sweet incarnation of life itself. Seated here before the window I have dreamed, I have mused, I have then concentrated with every fibre of my being upon a *rose.*

My mind was filled with redness — not the redness of the sun upon the sea, or the redness of blood, but the rich and radiant redness of the rose. My soul was suffused with the scent of a rose: as I brought my faculties to bear exclusively upon the image, these walls fell away, the walls of my very flesh fell away, and I seemed to merge in the texture, the odour, the color, the actual *essence* of a rose.

Shall I write of this, the seventh day, when seated at the window as the sun emerged from the sea, I felt the commanding of my consciousness? Shall I write of rising, descending the stairs, opening the iron door at the base of the lighthouse and peering out at the billows that swirled at my very feet? Shall I write of stooping, of grasping, of holding?

Shall I write that I have indeed descended those iron stairs and returned here with my wave-borne trophy — *that this very day, from waters two hundred miles distant from any shore, I have reached down and plucked a fresh rose?*

Jan. 28. It has not withered! I keep it before me constantly in a vase on this table, and it is

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a priceless ruby plucked from dreams. It is real — as real as the howls of poor Neptune, who senses that something odd is afoot. His frantic barking does not disturb me; nothing disturbs me, for I am master of a power greater than earth or space or time. And I shall use this power, now, to bring me the final boon. Here in my tower I have become quite the philosopher: I have learned my lesson well and realize that I do not desire wealth, or fame, or the trinkets of society. My need is simply this — Companionship. And now, with the power that is mine to control, I shall have it!

Soon, quite soon, I shall no longer be alone!

Jan. 30. The storm has returned, but I pay it no heed; nor do I mark the howlings of Neptune, although the beast is now literally dashing himself against the door of the store-room. One might fancy that his efforts are responsible for the shuddering of the very lighthouse itself, but no; it is the fury of the Northern gale. I pay it no heed, as I say, but I fully realize that this storm surpasses in extent and intensity anything I could imagine as witness to its predecessor.

Yet it is unimportant; even though the light above me flickers and threatens to be extinguished by the sheer velocity of wind that seeps through these stout walls; even though the ocean sweeps against the foundations with a force that makes solid stone seem flimsy as straw; even though the sky is a single black roaring mouth that yawns low upon the horizon to engulf me.

These things I sense but dimly, as I address myself to the appointed task. I pause now only for food and a brief respite — and scribble down these words to mark the progress of resolution towards an inevitable goal.

For the past several days I have bent my faculties to my will, concentrating utterly and to the uttermost upon the summoning of a Companion.

This Companion will be — I confess it! — a woman; a woman far surpassing the limitations of common mortality. For she is, and must be fashioned, of dreams and longing, of desire and delight beyond the bounds of flesh.

She is the woman of whom I have always dreamed, the One I have sought in vain through what I once presumed, in my ignorance, was the world of reality. It seems to me now that I have always known her, that my soul has contained her presence forever. I can visualize her perfectly — I know her hair, each strand more precious than a miser's gold; the riches of her ivory and alabaster brow, the perfection of her face and form are etched forever in my con-

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sciousness. DeGrät would scoff that she is but the figment of a dream — but DeGrät did not see the rose.

The rose — I hesitate to speak of it — has gone. It was the rose which I set before me when first I composed myself to this new effort of will. I gazed at it intently until vision faded, senses stilled, and I lost myself in the attempt of conjuring up my vision of a Companion.

Hours later, the sound of rising waters from without aroused me. I gazed about, my eyes sought the reassurance of the rose and rested only upon a *foulness*. Where the rose had risen proudly in its vase, red crest rampant upon a living stem, I now perceived only a noxious, utterly detestable strand of ichorous decay. No rose this, but only seaweed; rotted, noisome and putrescent. I flung it away, but for long moments I could not banish a wild presentiment — was it true that I had deceived myself? Was it a weed, and only a weed I plucked from the ocean's breast? Did the force of my thought momentarily invest it with the attributes of a rose? Would anything I called up from the depths — the depths of sea or the depths of consciousness — be *truly* real?

The blessed image of the Companion came to soothe these fevered speculations, and I knew myself saved. There *was* a rose; perhaps my thought had created it and nourished it — only when my entire concentration turned to other things did it depart, or resume another shape. And with my Companion, there will be no need for focussing my faculties elsewhere. She, and she alone, will be the recipient of everything my mind, my heart, my soul possesses. If will, if sentiment, if love are needed to preserve her, these things she shall have in entirety. So there is nothing to fear. Nothing to fear. . . .

Once again now I shall lay my pen aside and return to the great task — the task of "creation", if you will — and I shall not fail. The fear (I admit it!) of loneliness is enough to drive me forward to unimaginable brinks. She, and she alone, can save me, shall save me, *must* save me! I can see her now — the golden glitter of her — and my consciousness calls to her to rise, to appear before me in radiant reality. Somewhere upon these storm-tossed seas she *exists*, I know it — and wherever she may be, my call will come to her and she will respond.

Jan. 31. The command came at midnight. Roused from the depths of the most profound innermost communion by a thunderclap, I rose as though in the grip of somnambulistic compulsion and moved down the spiral stairs.

The lantern I bore trembled in

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my hand; its light wavered in the wind, and the very iron treads beneath my feet shook with the furious force of the storm. The booming of the waves as they struck the lighthouse walls seemed to place me within the center of a maelstrom of ear-shattering sound, yet over the demoniacal din I could detect the frenzied howls of poor Neptune as I passed the door behind which he was confined. The door shook with the combined force of the wind and of his still desperate efforts to free himself — but I hastened on my way, descending to the iron door at the base of the lighthouse.

To open it required the use of both hands, and I set the lantern down at one side. To open it, moreover, required the summoning of a resolution I scarcely possessed — for beyond that door was the force and fury of the wildest storm that ever shrieked across these seething seas. A sudden wave might dash me from the doorway, or, conversely, enter and inundate the lighthouse itself.

But consciousness prevailed; consciousness drove me forward.

I *knew*, I thrilled to the certainty that *she* was without the iron portal — I unbolted the door with the urgency of one who rushes into the arms of his beloved.

The door swung open — blew open — roared open — and the storm burst upon me; a ravening monster of black-mouthed waves capped with white fangs. The sea and sky surged forward as if to attack, and I stood enveloped in Chaos. A flash of lightning revealed the immensity of utter Nightmare.

I saw it not, for the same flash illumined the form, the lineaments of *she* whom I sought.

Lightning and lantern were unneeded — her golden glory outshone all as she stood there, pale and trembling, a goddess arisen from the depths of the sea!

Hallucination, vision, apparition? My trembling fingers sought, and found, their answer. Her flesh was real — cold as the icy waters from whence she came, but palpable and permanent. I thought of the storm, of doomed ships and drowning men, of a girl cast upon the waters and struggling towards the succor of the lighthouse beacon. I thought of a thousand explanations, a thousand miracles, a thousand riddles or reasons beyond rationality. Yet only one thing mattered — my Companion was here, and I had but to step forward and take her in my arms.

No word was spoken, nor could one be heard in all that Inferno. No word was needed, for she smiled. Pale lips parted as I held out my arms, and she moved closer. Pale lips parted — and I saw the pointed teeth, set in rows

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like those of a shark. Her eyes, fishlike and staring, swam closer. As I recoiled, her arms came up to cling, and they were cold as the waters beneath, cold as the storm, cold as death.

In one monstrous moment I *knew*, knew with uttermost certainty, that the power of my will had indeed summoned, the call of my consciousness *had* been answered. But the answer came not from the living, for nothing lived in this storm. I had sent my will out over the waters, but the will penetrates all dimensions, and my answer had come from *below* the waters. *She* was from below, where the drowned dead lie dreaming, and I had awakened her and clothed her with a horrid life. A life that thirsted, and must drink. . . .

I think I shrieked, then, but I heard no sound. Certainly, I did not hear the howls from Neptune as the beast, burst from his prison, bounded down the stairs and flung himself upon the creature.

His furry form bore her back and obscured my vision; in an instant she was falling backwards, away, into the sea that spawned her. Then, and only then, did I catch a glimpse of the final moment of animation in that which my consciousness had summoned. Lightning seared the sight inexorably upon my soul — the sight of the ultimate blasphemy I had created in my pride. The rose had wilted. . . .

The rose had wilted and become seaweed. And now, the golden one was gone and in its place was the bloated, swollen obscenity of a thing long-drowned and dead, risen from the slime and to that slime returning.

Only a moment, and then the waves overwhelmed it, bore it back into the blackness. Only a moment, and the door was slammed shut. Only a moment, and I raced up the iron stairs, Neptune yammering at my heels. Only a moment, and I reached the safety of this sanctuary.

Safety? There is no safety in the universe for me, no safety in a consciousness that could create such horror. And there is no safety here — the wrath of the waves increases with every moment, the anger of the sea and its creatures rises to an inevitable crescendo.

Mad or sane, it does not matter, for the end is the same in either case. I know now that the lighthouse will shatter and fall. I am already shattered, and must fall with it.

There is time only to gather these notes, strap them securely in a cylinder and attach it to Neptune's collar. It may be that he can swim, or cling to a fragment of debris. It may be that a ship, passing by this toppling beacon, may stay and search the waters for a sign — and thus find and rescue the gallant beast.

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That ship shall not find me. I go with the lighthouse and go willingly, down to the dark depths. Perhaps — is it but perverted poetry? — I shall join my Companion there forever. Perhaps . . .

The lighthouse is trembling. The beacon flickers above my head and I hear the rush of waters in their final onslaught. There is — yes — a wave, bearing down upon me. It is higher than the tower, it blots out the sky itself, everything. . . .

Close Behind Him

(Continued from page 123)

they talk of guilt complexes and inhibitions. Names change. When I was a boy the same sort of thing was known as a bad conscience.

"When one has the main facts, these things become obvious to anyone of experience. Your husband was engaged in — well, to put it bluntly, burgling the house of a man whose interests were mystic and occult. Something that happened there gave him a shock and unbalanced his judgment.

"As a result, he has difficulty in distinguishing between the real things he sees and the imaginary ones his uneasy conscience shows him. It isn't very complicated. He feels he is being dogged. Somewhere in his subconscious lie the lines from The Ancient Mariner:

Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread

and the two come together. And, in addition to that, he appears to have developed a primitive, vampiric type of phobia.

"Now, once we are able to help him dispel this obsession, he —" He broke off, suddenly aware of the look on his listener's face. "What is it?" he asked.

"But, Doctor," Liz said. "Those footmarks. I —" She was cut short abruptly by a sound from above that was half groan and half scream.

The doctor was up the stairs before she could move. When she followed him, it was with a heavy certainty in her heart.

She stood in the doorway watching as he bent over the bed. In a moment he turned, grave-eyed, and gave a slight shake of his head. He put his hand on her shoulder, then went quietly past her out of the room.

For some seconds Liz stood without moving. Then her eyes dropped from the bed to the floor. She trembled. Laughter, a high-pitched, frightening laughter shook her as she looked at the red naked footprints which led away from the bedside, across the floor and down the stairs, after the doctor. . . .

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